American Songwriter®
the craft of music
January | February 2017
Vol. 32, No. 2

THE *LEGENDS* ISSUE

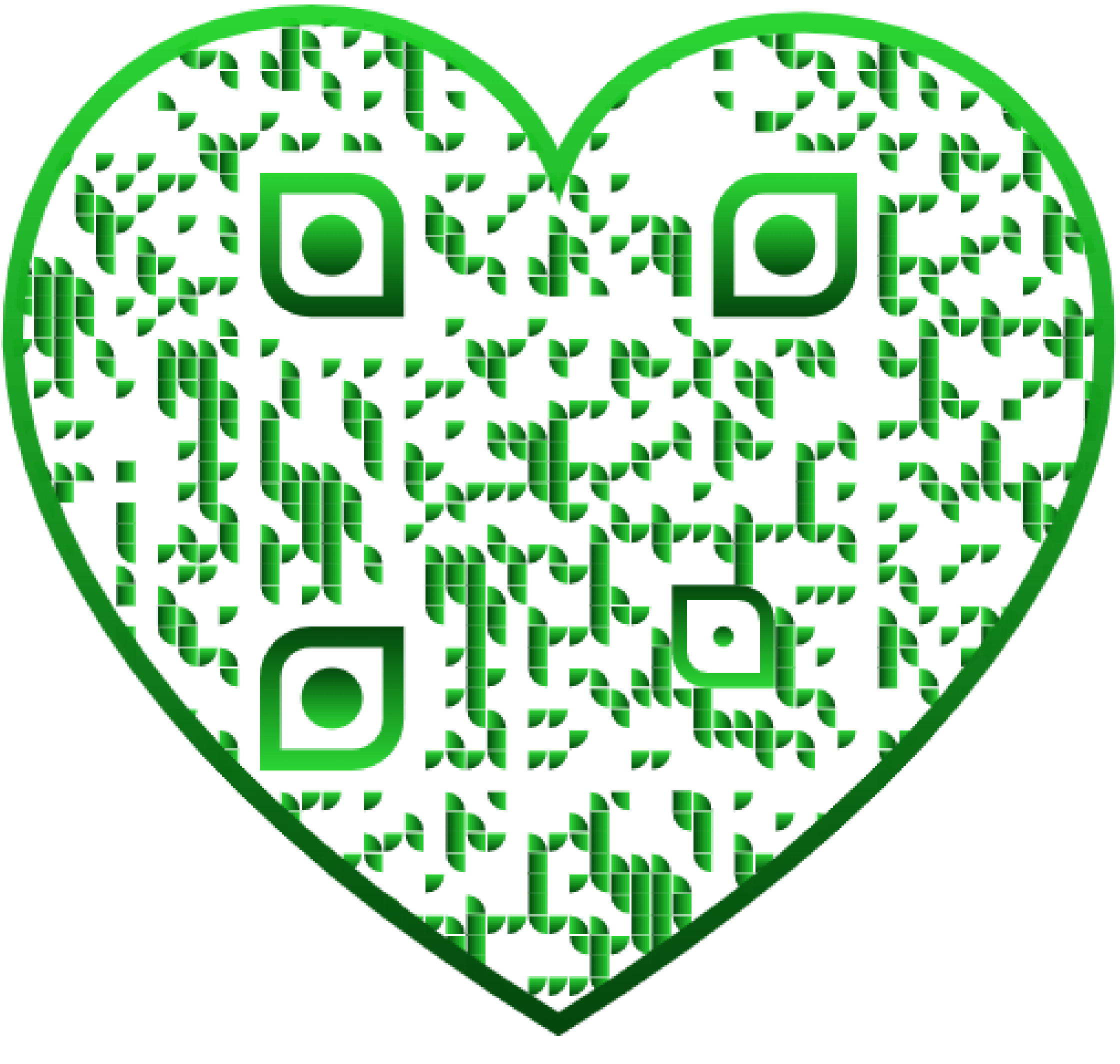
*STARRING*

# LEONARD COHEN

*FEATURING*

PAUL SIMON
RANDY NEWMAN
BOB WEIR
THE BEACH BOYS
THE PIXIES
ALEJANDRO ESCOVEDO
JON LANGFORD

*AND MORE!*



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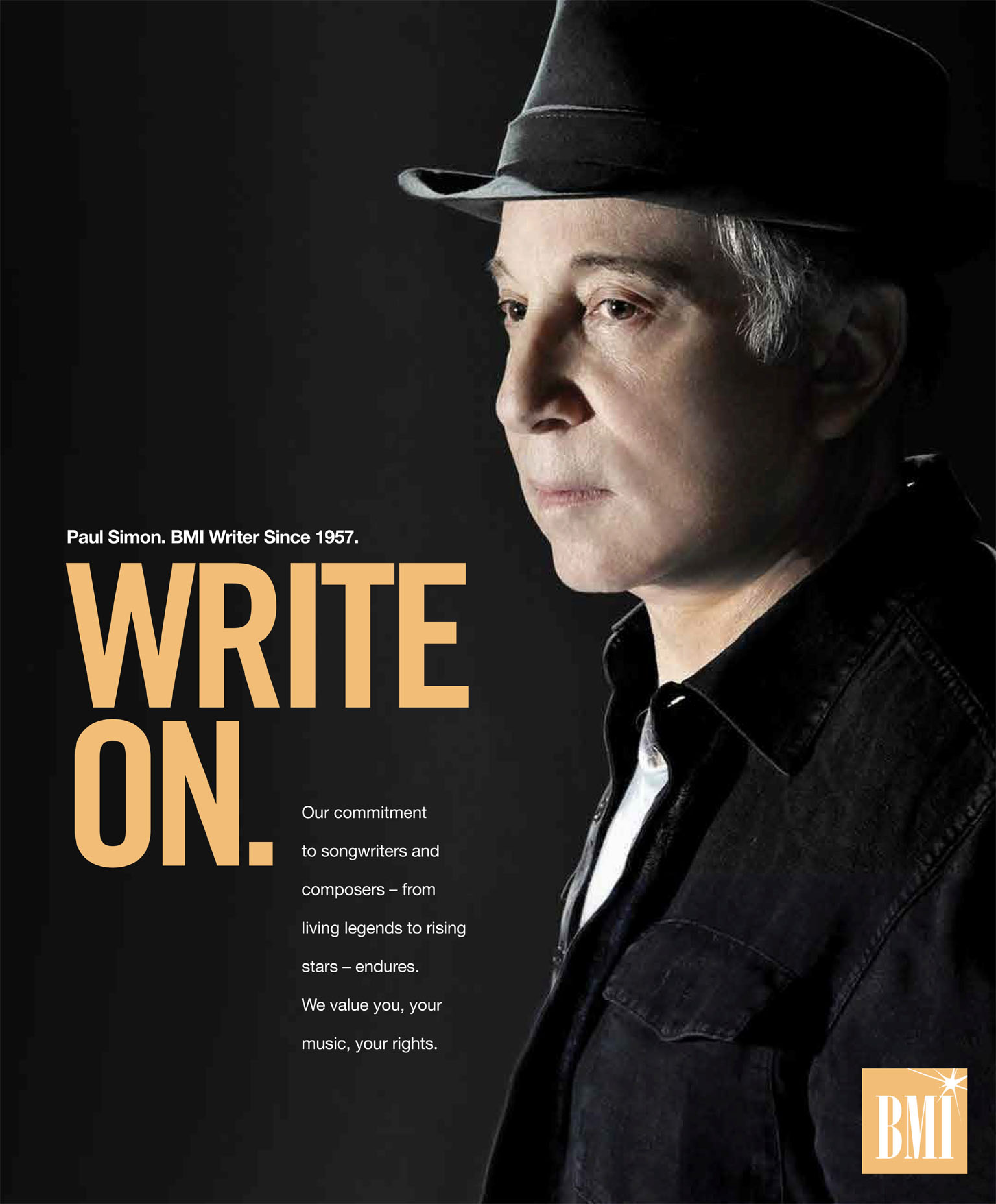

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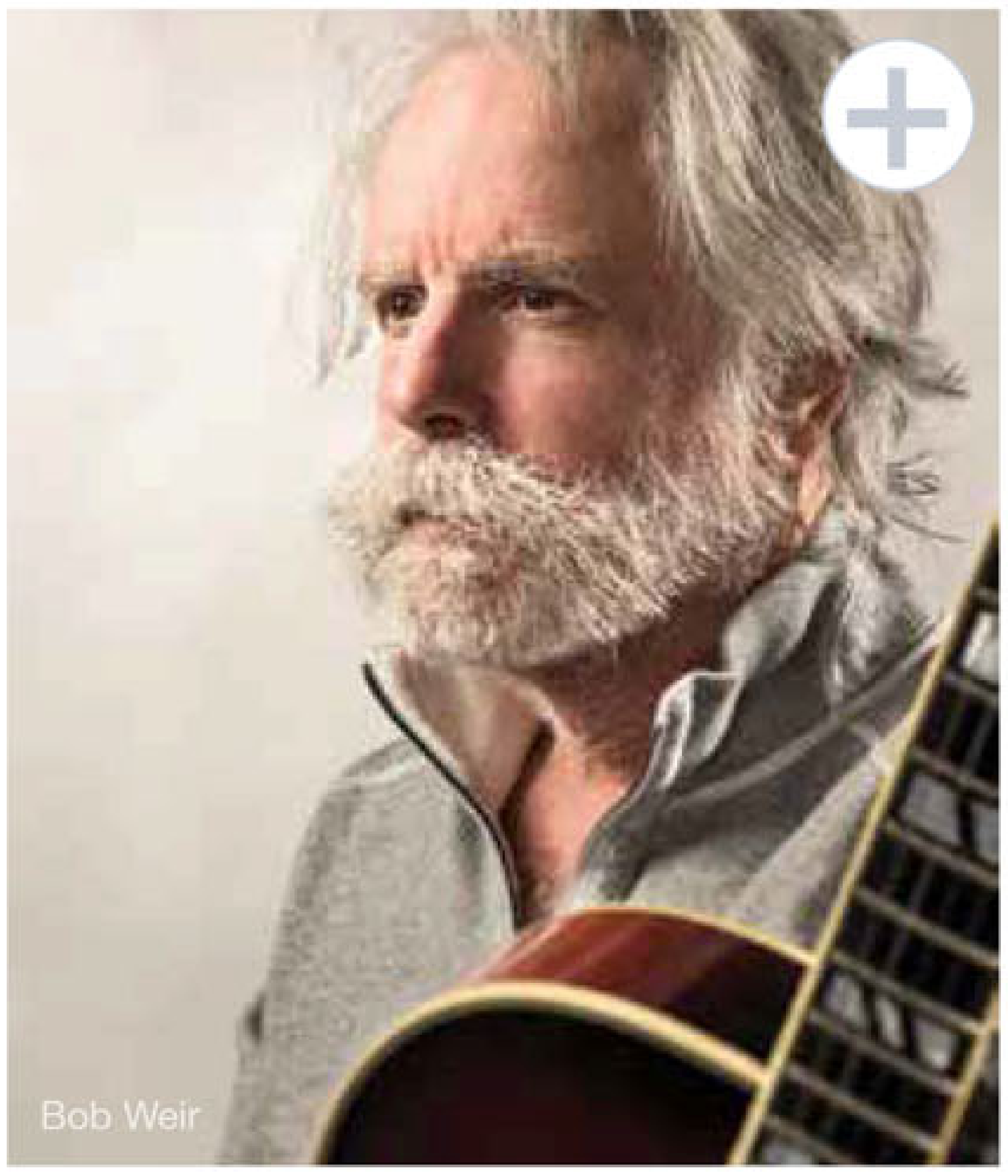
Leonard Cohen


Bob Weir

The Pixies

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**JON LANGFORD**
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**THE PIXIES**
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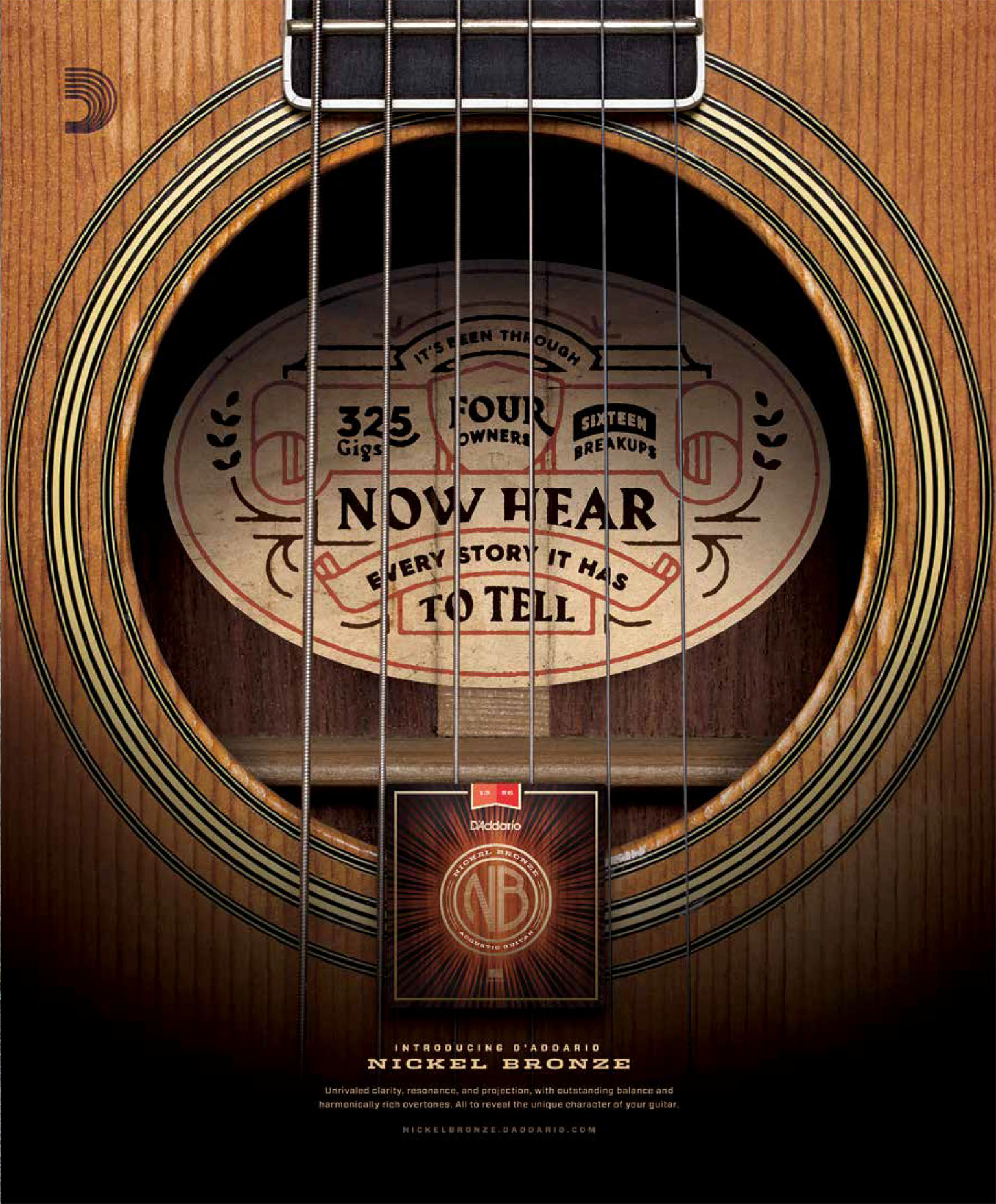

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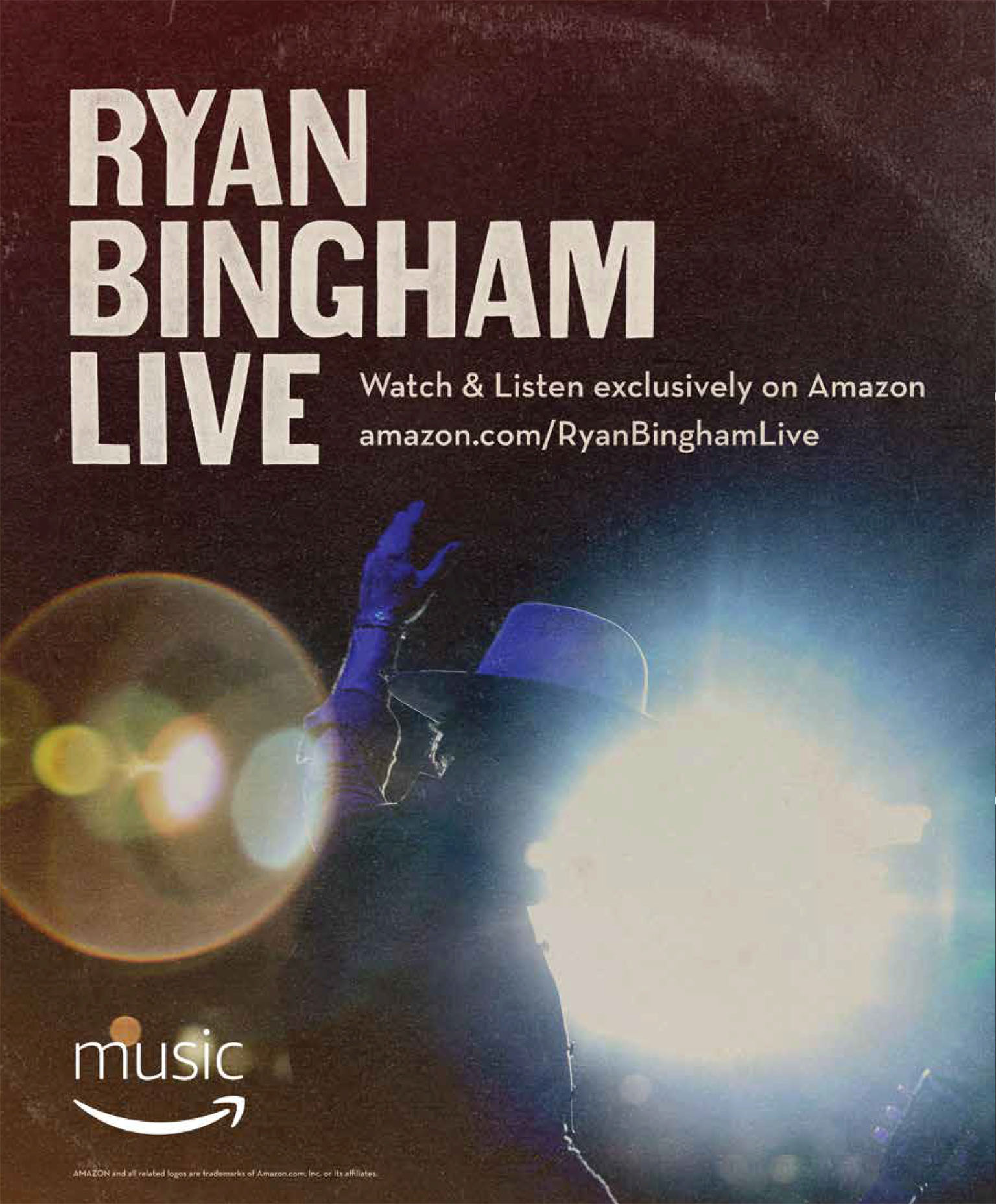
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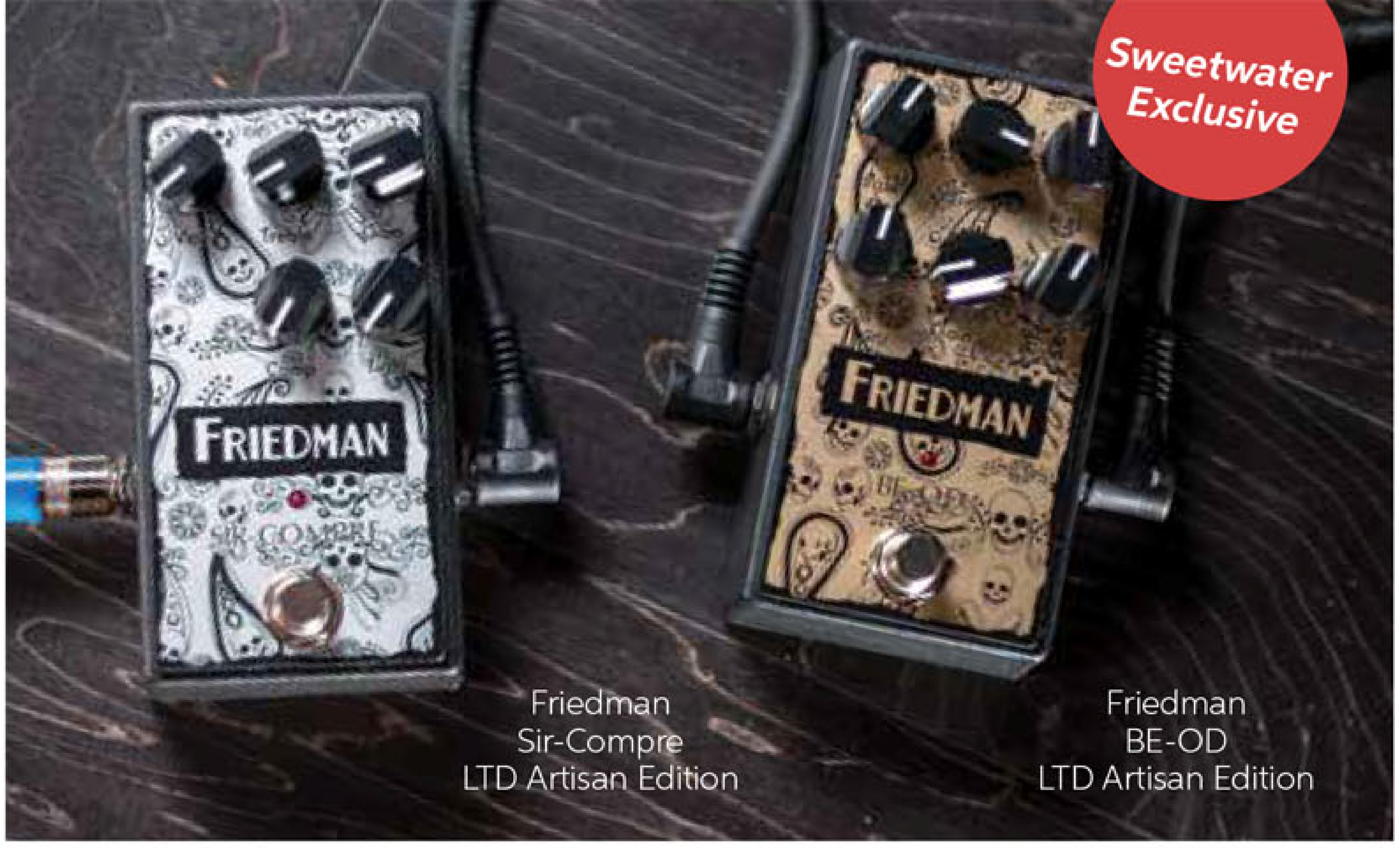


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EDITOR'S NOTE

# BUSY BEING BORN

It was a dark year in the Tower of Song.

Death came calling like a thief in the night, as they say, and took some of our best songwriters with him. David Bowie, Prince, Leonard Cohen, Merle Haggard, Guy Clark. There were many more but one loses count.

We were lucky to have the above as long as we did. All raised holy hell in their time, yet defied the rock-and-roll cliché whose story ends with a good-looking corpse. Each slayed personal demons, survived trends and turbulence in the music business, and continued to write well into their winter years — leaving behind bodies of work that will inspire for some time.

Bowie and Cohen, in particular, said goodbye at the top of their game, serving up two of the best albums of the year.

Even before news of his death broke, Cohen was slated to appear on the cover of this issue. In early October, Senior Editor Paul Zollo, an old acquaintance of the maestro, was invited to attend an international press event in Los Angeles heralding the release of *You Want It Darker*. The album was debuted in its entirety and a Q&A session followed.

It was a special evening. At one point during the group interview, Cohen singled out Zollo and told the audience, "I just want you to know that Paul Zollo did one of the best interviews with me that I ever did."

That interview from 1992, which is referenced in the cover story, is full of bon mots and little starbursts of wisdom about the craft. Cohen, an ordained Buddhist monk, was also monastic in his approach to songwriting, often rising at 4:30 a.m. to begin the day's work. For him, it was always a struggle. "Some people may find it encouraging to see how slow and dismal and painstaking is the process," he told Zollo, before showing him some of the 60-odd discarded verses he had written for "Democracy."

There's a lot more to chew on in this issue, as we sit down with Paul Simon, Randy Newman and Bob Weir, all veteran songwriters who are still busy being born, to borrow Dylan's phrase, and still raising the bar in the Tower of Song.

Caine O'Rear

**Caine O'Rear**
Editor-in-Chief

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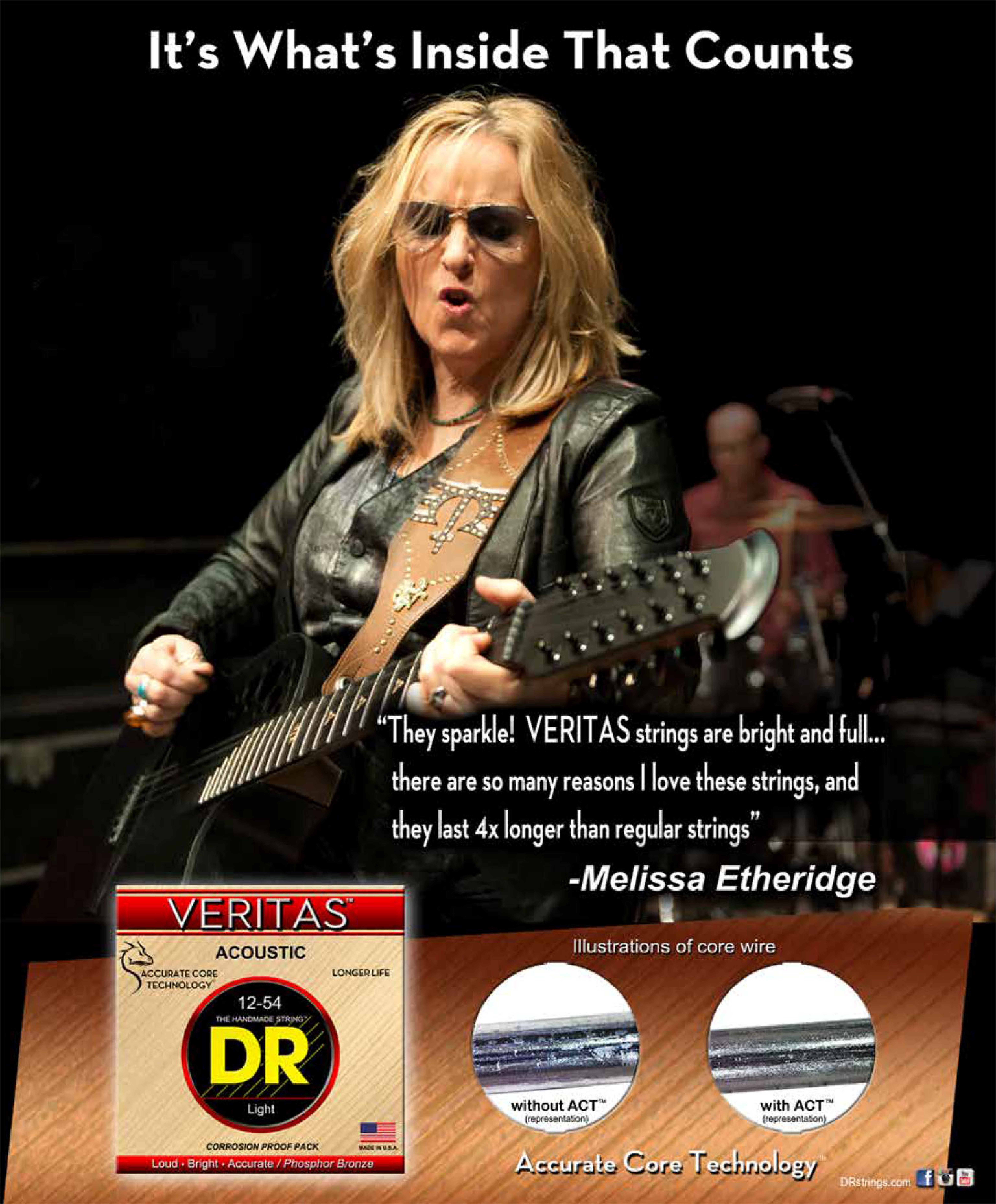
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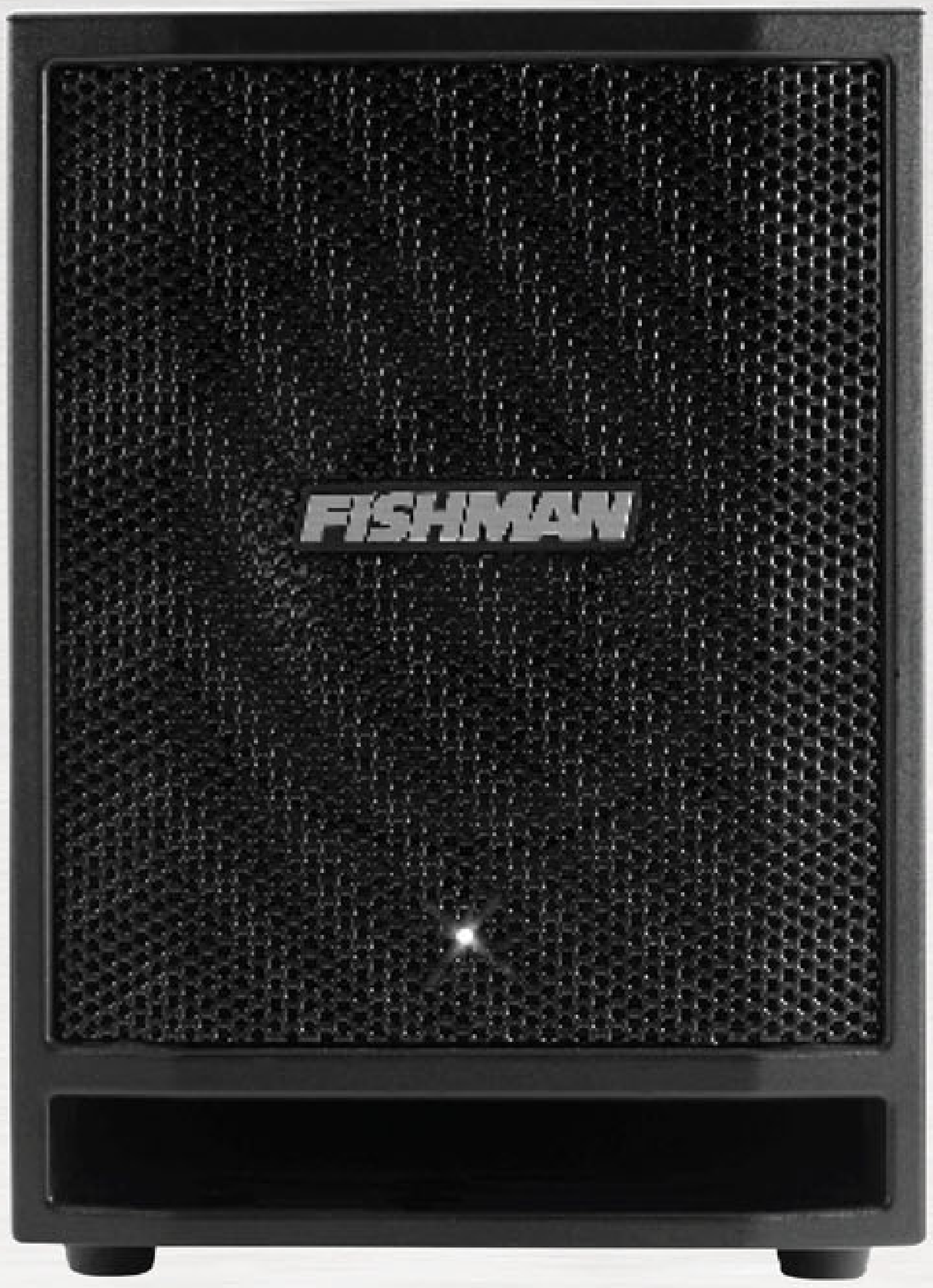

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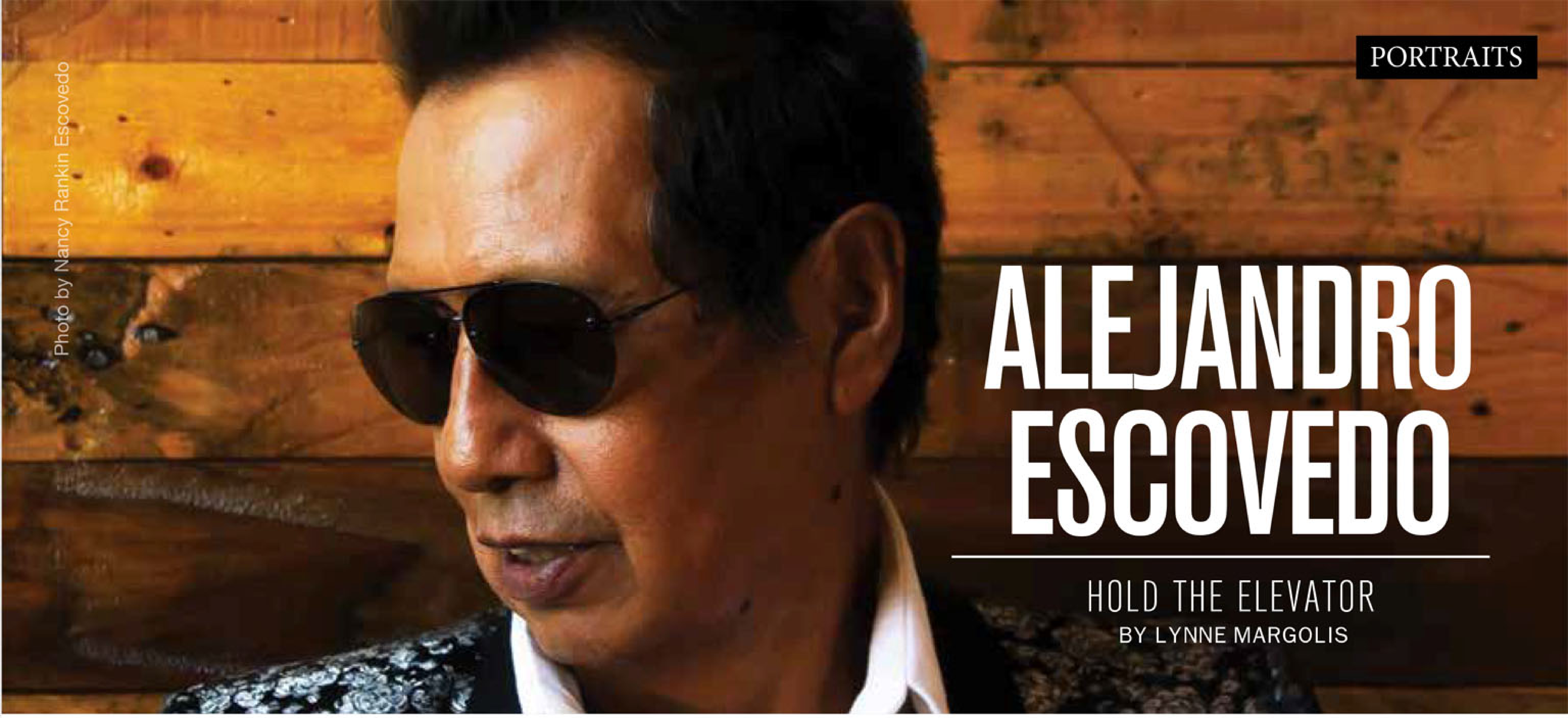

Photo by Nancy Rankin Escovedo

# ALEJANDRO ESCOVEDO

## HOLD THE ELEVATOR

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS

Like most artists, Alejandro Escovedo has a long list of influences and esteemed contemporaries. But unlike most artists, he also calls several of them "collaborators." Velvet Underground hero John Cale produced Escovedo's 2006 album, *The Boxing Mirror*; Tony Visconti, whose credits include T. Rex, Iggy Pop and David Bowie, helmed three in a row after that. Chuck Prophet co-wrote all three; Bruce Springsteen harmonized on *Street Songs*' "Always A Friend." When Escovedo's label didn't hear an album's worth of songs for *Real Animal*, he asked Ian Hunter for help.

"I have a tape of Ian singing all my songs back to me, and they sound just like Mott the Hoople," Escovedo recalls while sitting outside an Austin coffee shop one sunny afternoon. Despite his own accomplishments, which, at the time, included sharing management with Springsteen, Escovedo remembers feeling like a fan boy. He still doesn't regard himself as a peer to those artists (except for Prophet).

Which is why "legend" status confounds him as much as it did when *No Depression*, the one-time alt-country/Americana bible, anointed him in 1998 as its first Artist of the Decade — two years early. In 2006, he also earned the Americana Music Association's Lifetime Achievement Award for Performance. But he regards legends as posthumous entities, and hasn't yet reconciled his mother's disapproval of his career choice, or the fact that he stumbled into it. Escovedo didn't even play guitar until he was 24, when a college film project about a band that couldn't play spawned reality-imitates-art (pre-Spinal Tap) punkers the Nuns. The San Francisco band opened for the Ramones and the Sex Pistols before dissolving.

"It wasn't like I was this ambitious guy who was driven to be that. It kind of grew around me," he says. But he rose to the challenge, shaping his influences into his own sound.

"You steal from genius, you become genius," he jokes, paraphrasing Salvador Dali. But Escovedo's latest release, *Burn Something Beautiful*, includes theft-free references to glam-rock, punk, grunge and vintage pop, plus plenty of feedback-filled rawk. And the occasional chiming Rickenbacker chord that could only come from Peter Buck, who co-produced with R.E.M. sideman Scott McCaughey. All three share songwriting credits.

They also maintain faith in the ethos of rock as rebellion. "We were into the soul and the spirit of rock and roll," Escovedo says of the Nuns. "That meant everything. How well you played meant nothing.

"But we loved Jerry Lee Lewis," Escovedo adds. "We loved George Jones, Hank Williams, James Brown — all the rebels of rock and roll. And soul music, and blues. Lightnin' Hopkins, Blind Willie Johnson, Howlin' Wolf. We loved all those people because they were outside the norm."

His early-'80s band Rank & File played cowpunk, well before alt-country was a term or future Bloodshot Records labelmates Old 97's or Whiskeytown — or even the label — existed. Launched in New York City, the band moved in 1980 to Escovedo's home state, Texas, seeking a country-music education in Austin. They found Lucinda Williams, Blaze Foley, Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark and Nanci Griffith. Joe Ely and Doug Sahm made the deepest impressions.

"Doug was so musical, and he loved all the things I loved: cowboys, baseball, marijuana, the Giants. And I looked up to him because he was from my hometown, San Antonio. And Joe, because he was a rocker, and also a brilliant songwriter. And what a performer … It was a golden time for songwriters, and I learned more through them than I have from anyone."

He rocked harder with the True Believers and Buick MacKane before going solo. Always, he pushed the edges, alternating rockers like "Castanets" with shimmery ballads like "Rosalie." Along the way, he became an Austin institution, staging standing-room-only South By Southwest shindigs; tributes to heroes from Lou Reed to Leonard Cohen; and inventive projects such as *By The Hand Of The Father*, a musical loosely based on his Mexican-American family history.

Though album sales and airplay have never matched Escovedo's acclaim, he's held on through touring. But he's also battled several storms, from a wife's suicide to the Hepatitis C that nearly killed him a dozen years ago, several marriages and divorces, and, while honeymooning in 2014 with his then-new wife, a category 4 hurricane that left them fighting for survival on Mexico's Baja Peninsula. He didn't know he was suffering from PTSD and adrenal fatigue until, in 2015, Escovedo began behaving erratically enough to land in the emergency room twice. It delayed the album a year. Meanwhile, the Escovedos moved to Dallas, and he took new Hep C drugs that finally eliminated the disease.

Not surprisingly, love and mortality are recurring themes in his new work, inspiring lines like the "Suit Of Lights" lyric, "Brought you silk, brought you jade/ and a bucket of blood in every note I played."

"Chuck and I wrote a song called 'Slow Down,'" Escovedo mentions. "Chuck would always joke that even the elevator doors seem to close faster now, 'cause time seems to accelerate as you get older. And there's so much you want to get in before the door closes."

Hold that damned elevator; posthumous-legend status can wait. ★

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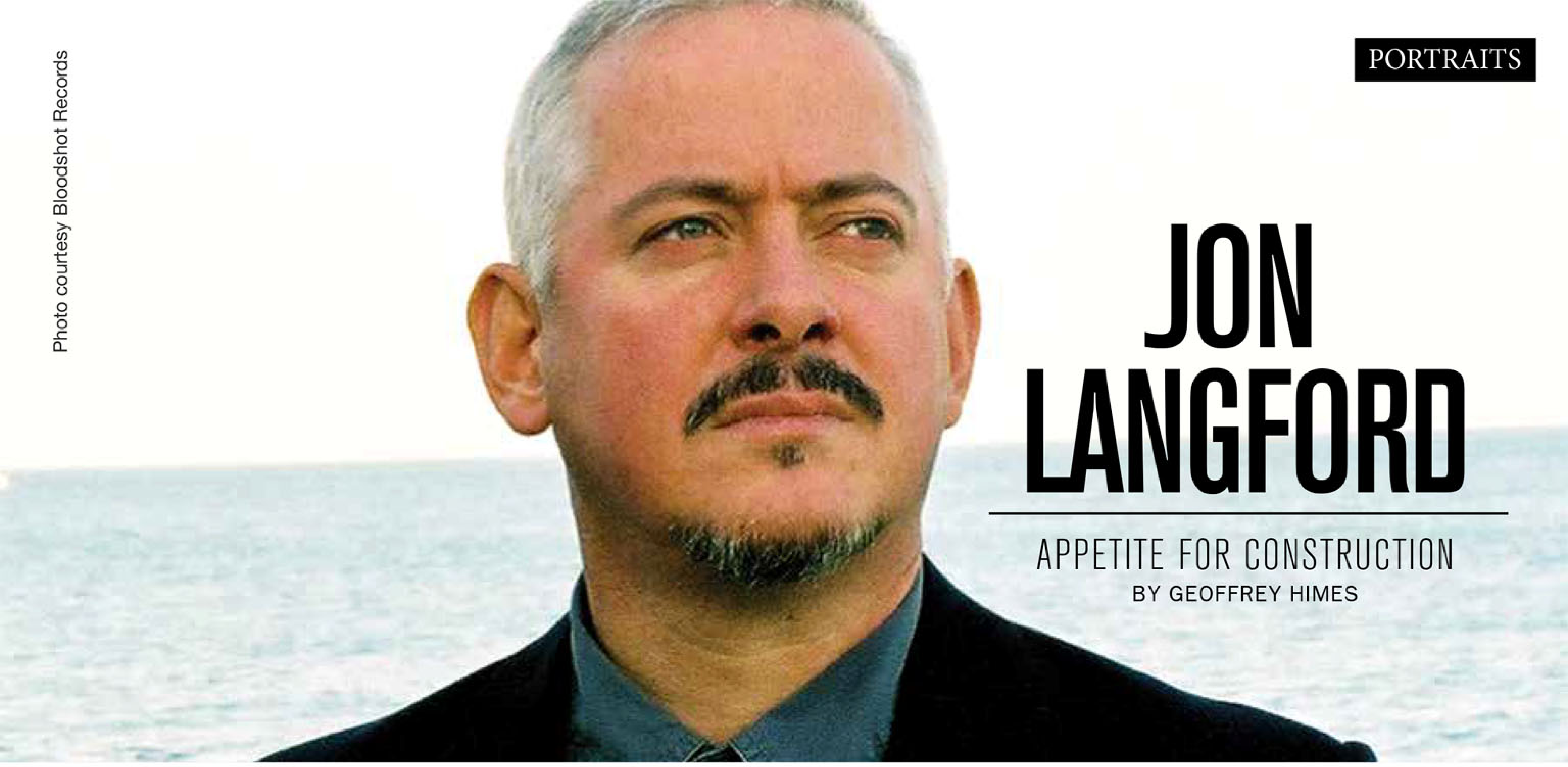

# JON LANGFORD

## APPETITE FOR CONSTRUCTION

BY GEOFFREY HIMES

You have to go out of your way to avoid Jon Langford in Austin when mid-March rolls around. The broad-shouldered Welshman with the ruddy face and silver crew cut is seemingly playing at every backyard party or creating a ruckus at every Tex-Mex restaurant. He might be accompanied by the legendary British punk band the Mekons, which he co-founded in 1977. He might be joined by one of his side projects: the Pine Valley Cosmonauts or Skull Orchard. Most often he'll be with his Chicago cow-punk band the Waco Brothers. Not for nothing is Langford known as "The Mayor of South by Southwest."

But there's no reason to avoid him; he usually delivers one of the most memorable sets of the SXSW week. During 25 years of attending the conference, I've seen him in a dozen different Austin clubs, but my favorite place to catch up with him is the annual Friday afternoon Bloodshot Records party in the backyard of the Yard Dog Gallery on South Congress Street. You enter the narrow stucco building from the street, and the front room is filled with outsider art for sale — including Langford's own depictions of pop-music ghosts who seem to emerge slowly from the leathery cracks and galactic dots of each picture.

You continue through the gallery, out the rear door and into the narrow, grassy backyard, where a white-canvas wedding tent has been erected, now packed full of bodies. After squeezing in, you find the Waco Brothers on the long, shallow stage riser. By the third song, they're doing Rockette-like leg kicks and by the eighth they're pouring whiskey over each other's heads. Far from spoiling the music, these antics seem to remove the last few restraints from a band that thrives on pell-mell momentum and loosey-goosey spontaneity. The Clash-meets-Cash songs, a combination of London punkdom and country icon Johnny, reach a new manic intensity.

"The art is my full-time day job," he says over the phone from his home in Chicago, but adds, "and the music is my full-time night job. Between the two I'm doing all right. South by Southwest is where the art and the music come together for me at the Yard Dog. My problem is idle hands; I like to have two or three gigs a day, otherwise what are you going to do but get drunk? I like coming back to Austin, because I see a lot of friends. I've played there the last 20 years."

When Langford brings the Waco Brothers back to Austin this March, the singer-guitarist will be coming off an astonishingly productive period, even for this notorious workaholic. Since the revealing documentary film *Revenge Of The Mekons* was released in 2014, Langford has released albums with Skull Orchard (*Here Be Monsters*), the Mini-Mekons & Robbie Fulks (*Jura*), the Waco Brothers (*Going Down In History*) and the Mekons (*Existentialism*).

Also in the works are a collaboration with Nashville veteran Norbert Putnam and the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section as well as the debut album from Bad Luck Jonathan, described by Jonathan Langford as a "socialist, voodoo space-rock band" and punningly named after Ugandan leader Goodluck Jonathan. During the same period Langford served a residency at the Country Music Hall of Fame, where he illustrated the *Nashville Cats* exhibit catalogue, while Will Oldham and Angel Olsen, performing as the Chivalrous Amoekons, recorded a Mekons tribute album, *Fanatic Voyage*.

"All these things make life more interesting, less boring," Langford says. "I'm lucky; I have a lot of people I can collaborate with, and most of those collaborations are based on friendships. We do things together so we have an excuse to hang out. They all have an elevated level of energy and enthusiasm for this sort of thing. I still have an appetite for songwriting, so I keep doing it. Also, thanks to the movie, we've never been more popular than we are now, so the more plates in the air the better."

The dynamic that ties all these projects together is tough-minded lyrics married to anything-goes music. Langford and his fellow songwriters are skeptical of sentiment, always alert to the power quotient in personal relationships and larger communities. Their political perspective is delivered in the form of stories rather than slogans, however, and delivered with the unstudied spontaneity that links punk to hillbilly and folk music, so the listener is pulled in before focusing on the words.

"If I'm writing the lyrics for the Mekons and the Waco Brothers," he explains, "there's a political thread to that, but the performance is never very polished. The lyrics are trying to describe the world or start a conversation rather than try to tell people how to think. On the *Here Be Monsters*, for example, there's a song called 'Drone Operator.' I don't like certain elements of Obama's drones, but rather than say that, I took on the character of the drone operator. I tried to imagine, if someone did that, what would their social life be." ★

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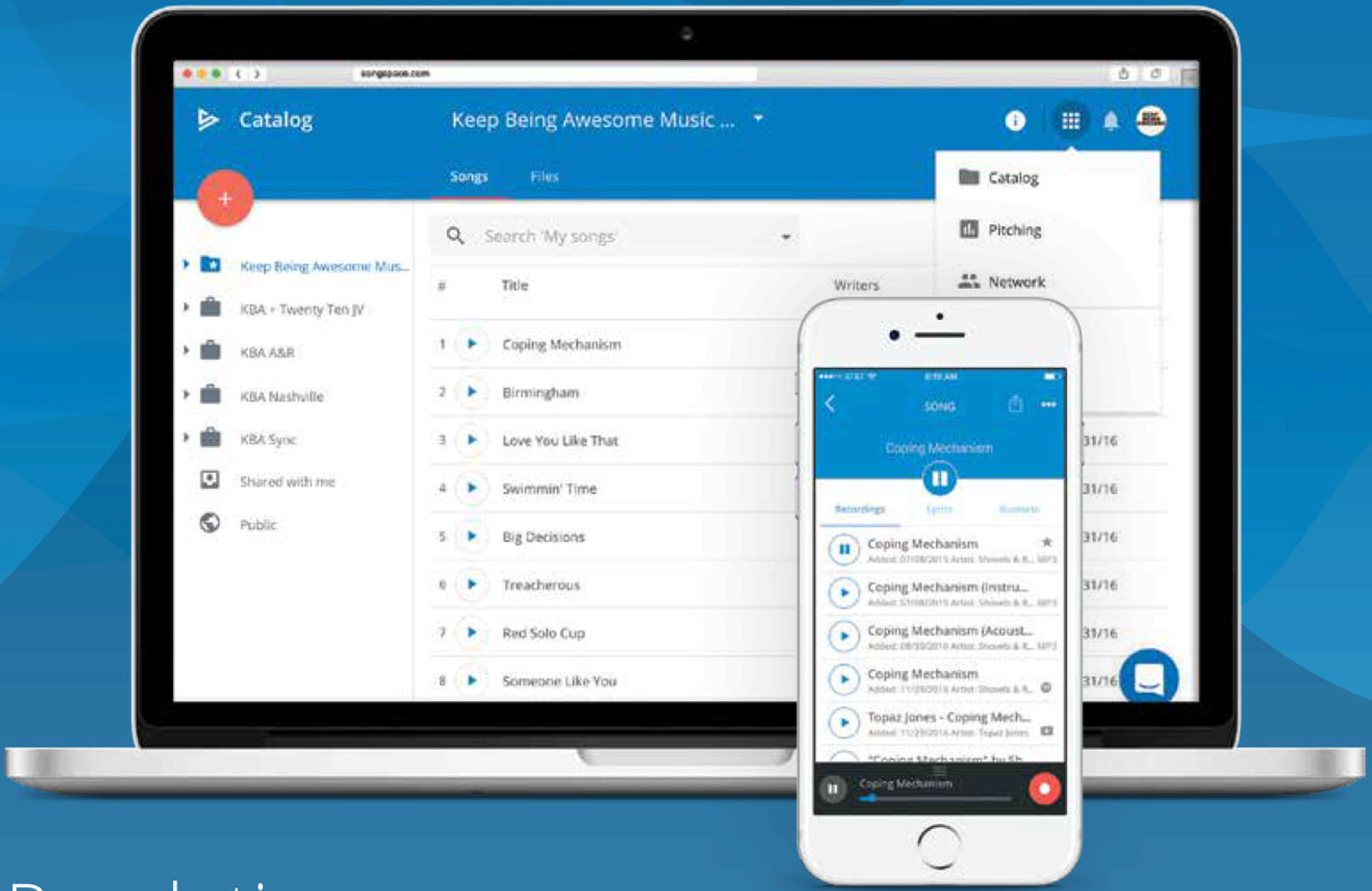


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Photo by Travis Shinn

# THE PIXIES

## PLAY WHAT YOU WANT

BY EMILY MAXWELL

Pixies, clockwise: Paz Lenchantin, David Lovering, Joey Santiago, Black Francis.

In the vein of alternative rock, few bands carry the weight of the Pixies, the cerebral project started by Black Francis just over 30 years ago. The Bostonian four-piece released some of the biggest rock hits at the tail end of the last millennium, including their instantly recognizable track "Where Is My Mind?," inspiring a countless number of younger acts along the way, perhaps most notably an anger-fueled grunge trio from Seattle who admitted to ripping off one of the band's songs for their own track, a little tune called "Smells Like Teen Spirit." After taking a break in 1993, wiped out from touring and the pressure of the world's desire for continued creative output, the band reunited in 2004 to record a few singles before parting ways with bassist Kim Deal in 2013. The band's most recent release, *Head Carrier*, is their strongest since going on hiatus and is full of well-written, well-played tracks.

The Pixies' return to greatness may have had something to do with how they made *Head Carrier*, which marked a significant change in their recording process. On each of their previous albums, that process was short as could be: the band would spend a few days getting ready to record, hop in the studio, get the job done and get back on the road as soon as possible. On *Head Carrier*, the band — who, for the first time, had nothing else to focus on but making the best record they could — spent six weeks in pre-production, which gave singer Black Francis and co. time to iron out the kinks and figure out what worked and didn't work. "By the time we got into the studio, we knew the songs inside and out and were ready to play," Francis says. "It made the entire process a lot smoother for us."

Time can't take *all* the credit for the band's rediscovered genius, of course; most of what's good about *Head Carrier* lies in how it reminds us that Black Francis remains one of modern rock's strongest and most unique talents. Keeping things fresh gets a bit more challenging over the years, he says, but the key lies in staying focused on all the musical spaces you haven't yet been to. "You find you've already been down a lot of avenues, so you have to find new places to go," he says. "Otherwise you keep doing the same thing again and again."

**"I think people will look back and think we were a smart band."**

The band walks the line between old spaces and new on "All I Think About Now," where they mourn the musical loss of Deal, issuing one final and proper goodbye to the creative force essential to crafting their early sound. "Remember when we were happy?" sings — ironically enough — Deal's replacement, Paz Lenchantin, who joined the band as a full-time member prior to the writing of this record. "That's all I think about now/ If you have any doubt/ I want to thank you anyhow." It's a peaceful sendoff to an old friend, a refreshing way to usher in the new era of the Pixies, and a gentle reminder that this band has come a long way, covering a lot of ground in their three-decade-and-counting career. Reflecting on the legacy the band has left so far, Francis seems to feel good about the mark he's left. Though his own kids don't yet appreciate his music — they're still at the age where they're rejecting what Dad thinks is "cool," he says — he has hope that fans will reflect fondly on what the band has been able to accomplish.

"I think people will look back and think we were a smart band," Francis says. "Smart about the way we were writing songs and what we were saying. At least I hope they will."

With all the perspective he's gained from writing dozens of songs and touring the world over, Francis' advice to the next generation of rockstars is simple: play what you want to play and your path will unwind before you. "Don't dwell on [finding your own sound] too much," he says. "Don't get in your own head about it."

It's hard to say what's next for The Pixies. At this juncture, it's impossible to tell if they'll crank out another album or return to hiatus, perfectly apropos for a band that has consistently proven themselves to be unpredictable at best. Either way, if there's a lesson to be learned from *Head Carrier*, it's that we can't count the Pixies out just yet: they certainly aren't giving fans any promises for the future, but they're not necessarily hanging up their hats, either. ★

# THE BEACH BOYS

## ALONE TOGETHER NOW

BY GEOFFREY HIMES

Photo from The Beach Boys' Pet Sounds photo shoot by George Jerman at San Diego Zoo, California in February 1966.
Clockwise from Top Left: Carl Wilson, Al Jardine, Brian Wilson, Mike Love, Dennis Wilson (in front)

Ben Greenman took a dangerous gamble in co-writing *I Am Brian Wilson: A Memoir*. The former *New Yorker* writer presented this autobiography of the chief Beach Boy as a disjointed narrative that jumps from topic to topic in a series of short, stilted sentences that reveal an astonishing naïveté. Greenman laid himself open to charges of rankly incompetent writing.

In fact, what he has done is a remarkable achievement. He has captured Brian's voice perfectly. As someone who has interviewed Brian on numerous occasions, I can testify to that. Just as importantly, Greenman has teased out of Brian's short attention span, forgetfulness and unsophisticated worldview the kind of detail and nuance that has often been absent from this much-told story

Wilson's autobiography is just one of four books about the Beach Boys that have come out over the past 18 months. Mike Love's *Good Vibrations: My Life As A Beach Boy* is the other high-profile publication. But fascinating in their own way are Kent Crowley's *Long Promised Road: Carl Wilson, Soul Of The Beach Boys* and James B. Murphy's *Becoming The Beach Boys*.

"Sometimes memories come back to me when I least expect them," Brian tells Greenman in the book. "Maybe that's the only way it works when you've lived the life I've lived: starting a band with my brothers, my cousin and my high school buddy that was managed by my father; watching my father become difficult and then impossible; watching myself become difficult and then impossible; watching women I loved come and go; watching children come into the world; watching my brothers get older; watching them pass out of the world. Some of those things shaped me. Others scarred me. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference."

You can sense Greenman boiling down a longer, rambling conversation here and organizing the information, but he never loses Brian's child-like voice nor his unguarded honesty. The wounded composer refuses to excuse any of the ways he was mistreated by others, but neither will he excuse all the ways he mistreated himself.

By contrast, Love's book is a more typical celebrity as-told-to autobiography. Some sections read like boilerplate research that could have come from a Wikipedia entry: surf music was invented in Hawaii, his co-writer James Hirsch explains, and the Beach Boys toured this country and then that country. But Love's own voice breaks through on a regular basis, the voice of an edgy hustler who spins every situation like a campaign manager or a lothario on the make. When he acknowledges his own mistakes, he minimizes them; when he brings up other folks' mistakes, he doesn't lie, but he selects the facts that will put them in the worst light and himself in the best. Again, this echoes Love's authentic voice.

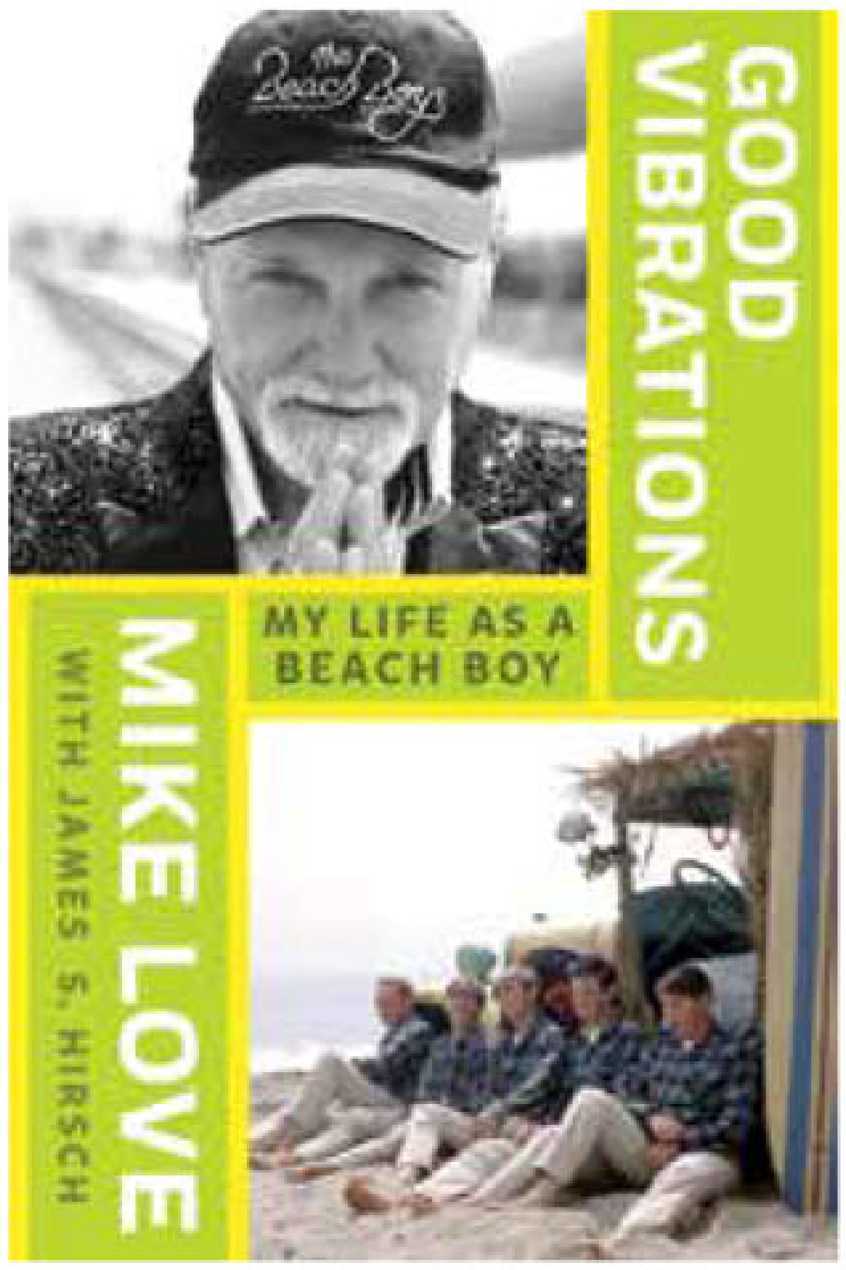
Love may be the second most disliked person in rock and roll (no one will ever top Ted Nugent in this category), and while he deserves some of that animosity, he doesn't deserve all of it. His overbearing personality obscures the fact that he is a great rock and roll singer, especially on uptempo material. His precision pitch on vowels and his percussive use of consonants — whether singing lead or adding doo-wop harmonies — are crucial to many of the Beach Boys' most famous songs. His years at L.A.'s multi-racial Dorsey High School gave him a grounding in R&B that he injected into the group, an essential element that is always overlooked in caricatures of the Beach Boys as a corny white band.

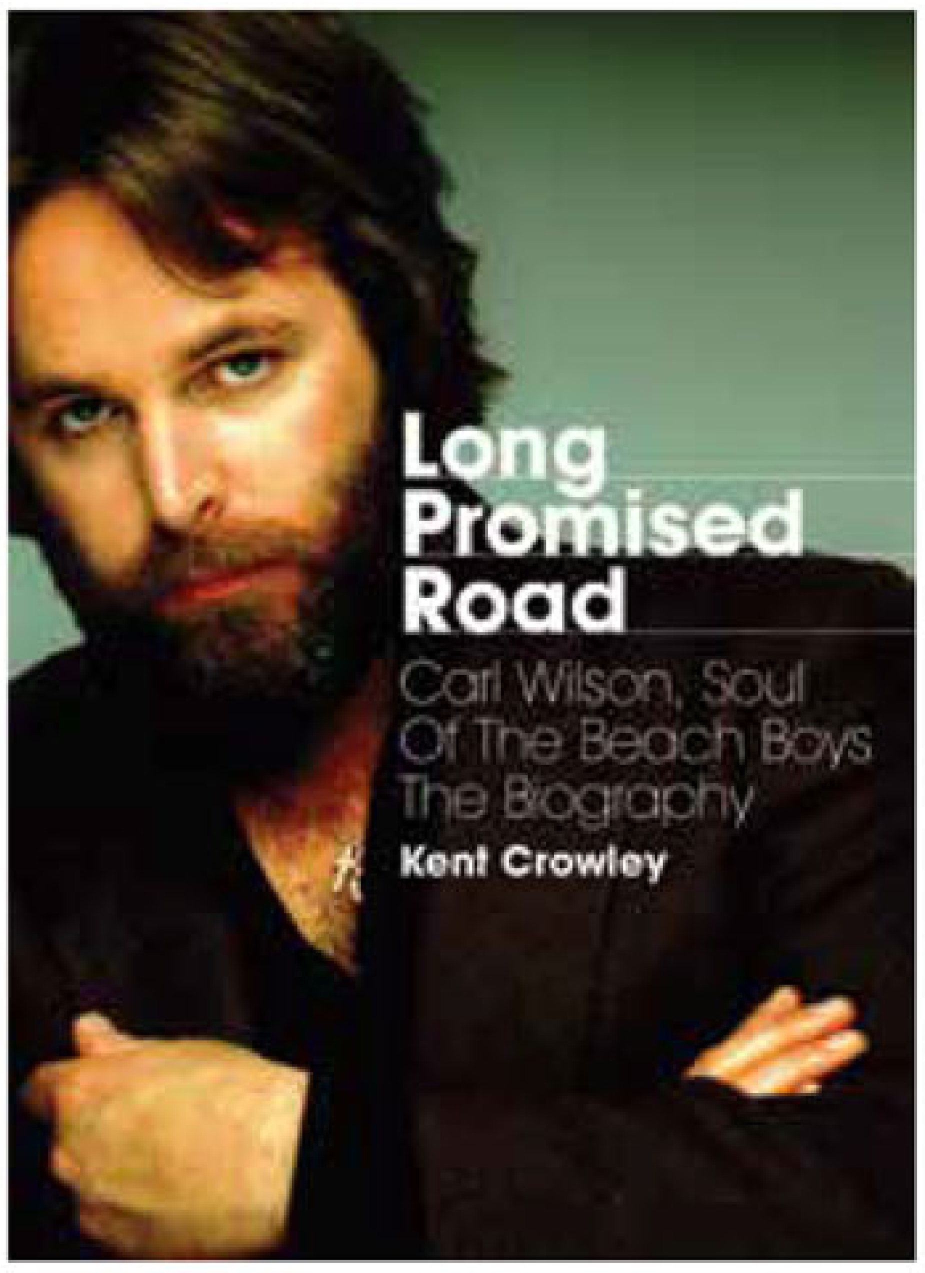
And he was a better lyricist than he's given credit for — not so much for the words' poetic meaning as for their sonic qualities. In one of his book's more revealing passages, Mike explains how he rewrote Brian's lyrics, "There's only so much to do in a little town; I get around from town to town," to the more rhythmically charged, "I'm getting bugged driving up and down the same old strip … Round, round, get around, I get around." Again and again he organized the sound (though rarely the meaning) of the words to enhance the music.

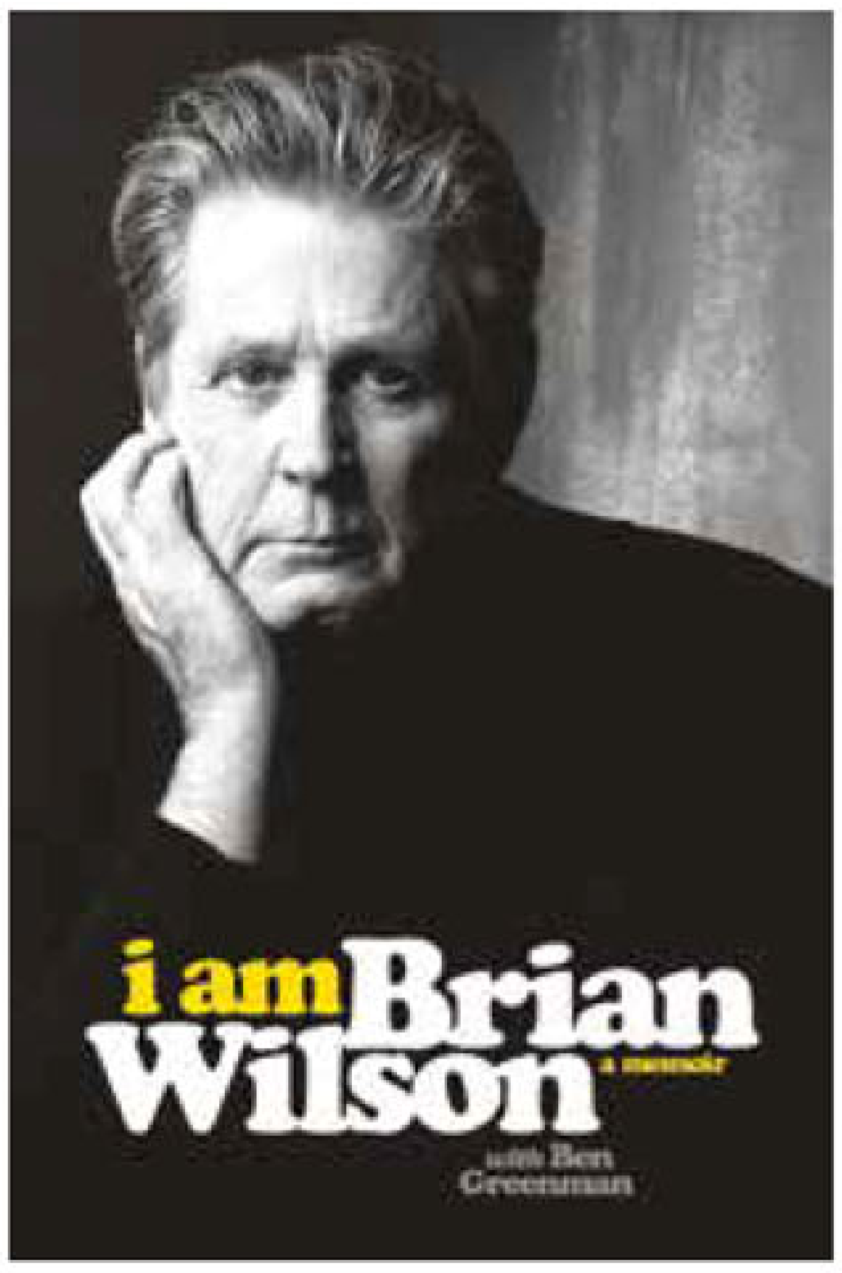
Occasionally the meaning would add something too — especially on his superb lyrics for "Warmth Of The Sun" — but more often it would detract. The book is filled with Love's best and worst lyrics, as if he can't tell the difference. But Love makes a persuasive case that he was cheated out of credit — and money — for many of the lyrics he wrote. His arguments that he was justified in turning the Beach Boys touring band into a money-making nostalgia machine that had no room for the other original members is less convincing.

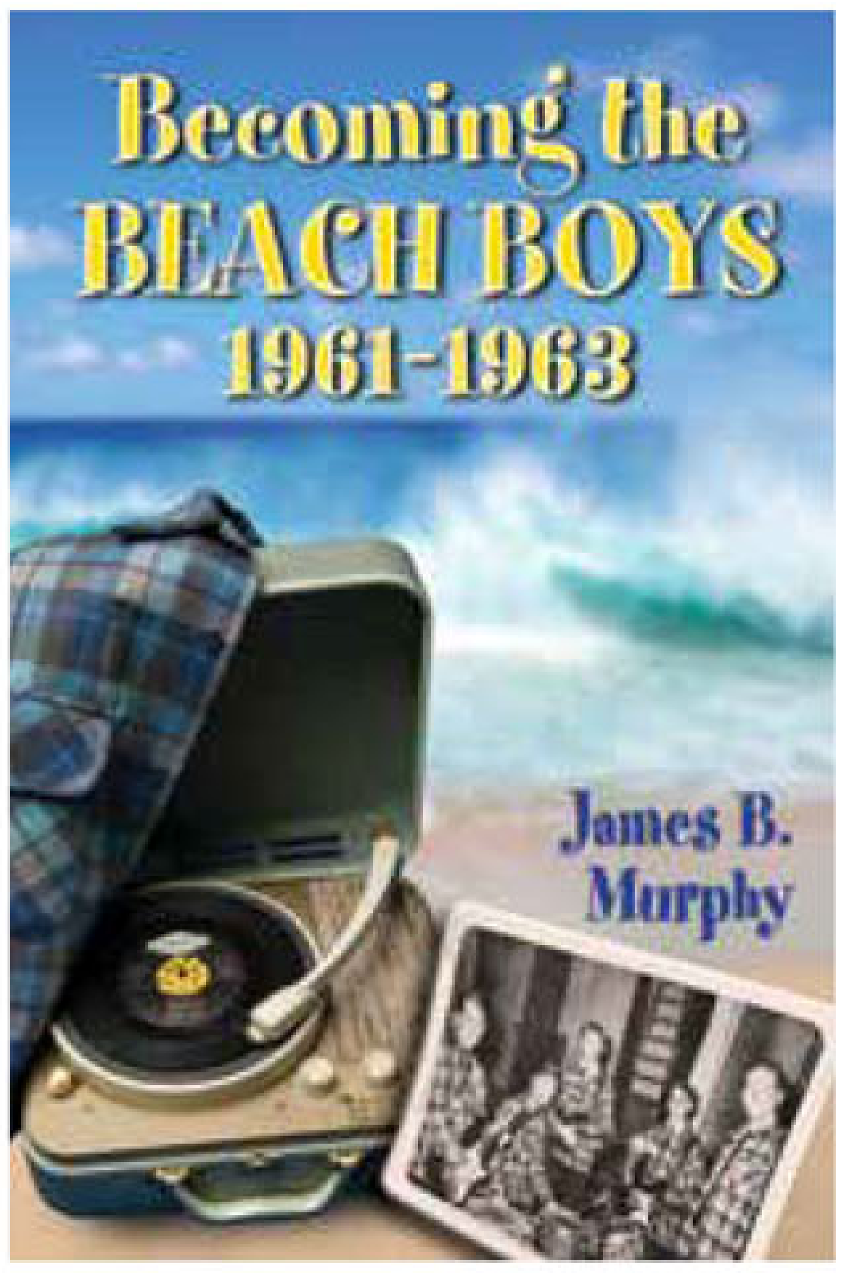
There's renewed interest in the Beach Boys, thanks in large part to Bill Pohlad's 2014 movie *Love & Mercy*. There are some wonderful scenes in the film, especially the depictions of Brian working in the studio with the Wrecking Crew musicians on the sessions that became *Pet Sounds*. And Nine Inch

Photo © Capitol Photo Archives




Nails producer Atticus Ross was so successful in imagining the sound of Brian's aural hallucinations that the resulting sound collages from the film are an important addition to the Beach Boys story.

The movie's story, however, was told from the perspective of Brian's second wife Melinda Ledbetter, and much like Mike Love, she spins the tale to make her enemies — Love, Brian's father Murry and Brian's therapist Eugene Landy — look like monsters. All three have done monstrous things, but to focus solely on that and ignore all the positive things they did is to distort reality.

The most remarkable thing about Brian's memoir is the more balanced presentation of these three alpha males. As the book tells it — and as my extended interviews with Carl confirmed — each one provided invaluable help to the gifted songwriter at crucial junctures. But each one tried to capitalize on that help by taking control of Brian's creativity — always with disastrous results.

You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to recognize a pattern here. A sensitive young boy, who is enabled by his father's own musical knowledge and ambitions even as he suffers from that same father's verbal and physical abuse, continues to seek out similar relationships as he grows up. Without Murry's help in renting and buying instruments and contacting record companies and live promoters in Southern California, the Beach Boys might never have gotten out of the Wilsons' garage in Hawthorne, but without Murry's browbeating, Brian might never have suffered lifelong self-doubt.

**What comes through in all these books is the truth that Brian Wilson didn't do it all alone.**

Without Love's lyrics, rock and roll instincts and innate showmanship, Brian's beautiful, jazzy music might never have found a large audience, but without Love's resistance to music that seemed uncommercial, Brian might have been more creative for a longer time than he was: without Landy's two different 24-hour therapy interventions, Brian might have died from his agoraphobia, ballooning weight and self-medication, but without Landy's micro-management of both Brian's personal and professional life, Brian wouldn't have wasted years as a virtual prisoner of his own doctor. The movie doesn't acknowledge these paradoxes, but the memoir does.

"It would be a lie to say that he didn't get results," Brian writes of Landy's first intervention in 1976. "He took the 300 pounds and brought them down to about 185, which is the weight I should have been … He got some results, but then he went too far. He was getting too involved." The pattern was amplified with the second intervention in 1983. Once again, Landy got the bloated, coke-addicted Brian healthy and sober, but then took such total control that he claimed co-writing credit on Brian's songs and made sure Brian's first autobiography, 1991's *Wouldn't It Be Nice: My Own Story*, was really Landy's story.

If oldest brother Brian is the Beach Boys' traumatized victim, first cousin Love its carnival barker and middle brother Dennis Wilson its sybaritic surfer (so guileless that he befriended Charles Manson), the youngest brother Carl Wilson was the band's island of sanity. That comes through in the Crowley biography and it jibes with my own close-up observations of the Beach Boys. Crowley's low-budget indie-press volume is obviously a labor of love, and despite some clumsy writing and lax editing, it does offer a much needed different perspective on the band.

Crowley makes a case not only for Carl's guitar innovations but also for Murry's much maligned musical talent. The father didn't have the son's genius, but he was a songwriter who got cuts. Murry's "Two-Step, Side-Step" was performed by Lawrence Welk on national TV and recorded by Rockabilly Hall of Famer Bonnie Lou. Murry's "Tabarin" was recorded by the Red Callender Orchestra and by the doo-wop group the Hollywood Four Flames, featuring Bobby Day. Murry proved to his son that a nobody from a lower-middle-class suburb like Hawthorne could get his foot in the door of the music biz.

There's a touching scene in the new documentary DVD, *The Beach Boys/Pet Sounds*, where today's Brian sits at a piano and demonstrates how his dad taught him to play boogie-woogie rhythms in his left hand. Then he plays and sings Murry's song, "His Darling And Me," remarking how beautiful it is and emphasizing that his dad wrote that. None of this erases the reality that Murry was a needlessly harsh disciplinarian, who reacted with juvenile jealousy when his sons outgrew him musically, but the other side of the story deepens the picture and explains why Brian co-wrote a song (the delightful "Breakaway") with his dad after angrily firing him a few years earlier.

"People probably don't imagine the Wilsons

Photo © Capitol Photo Archives

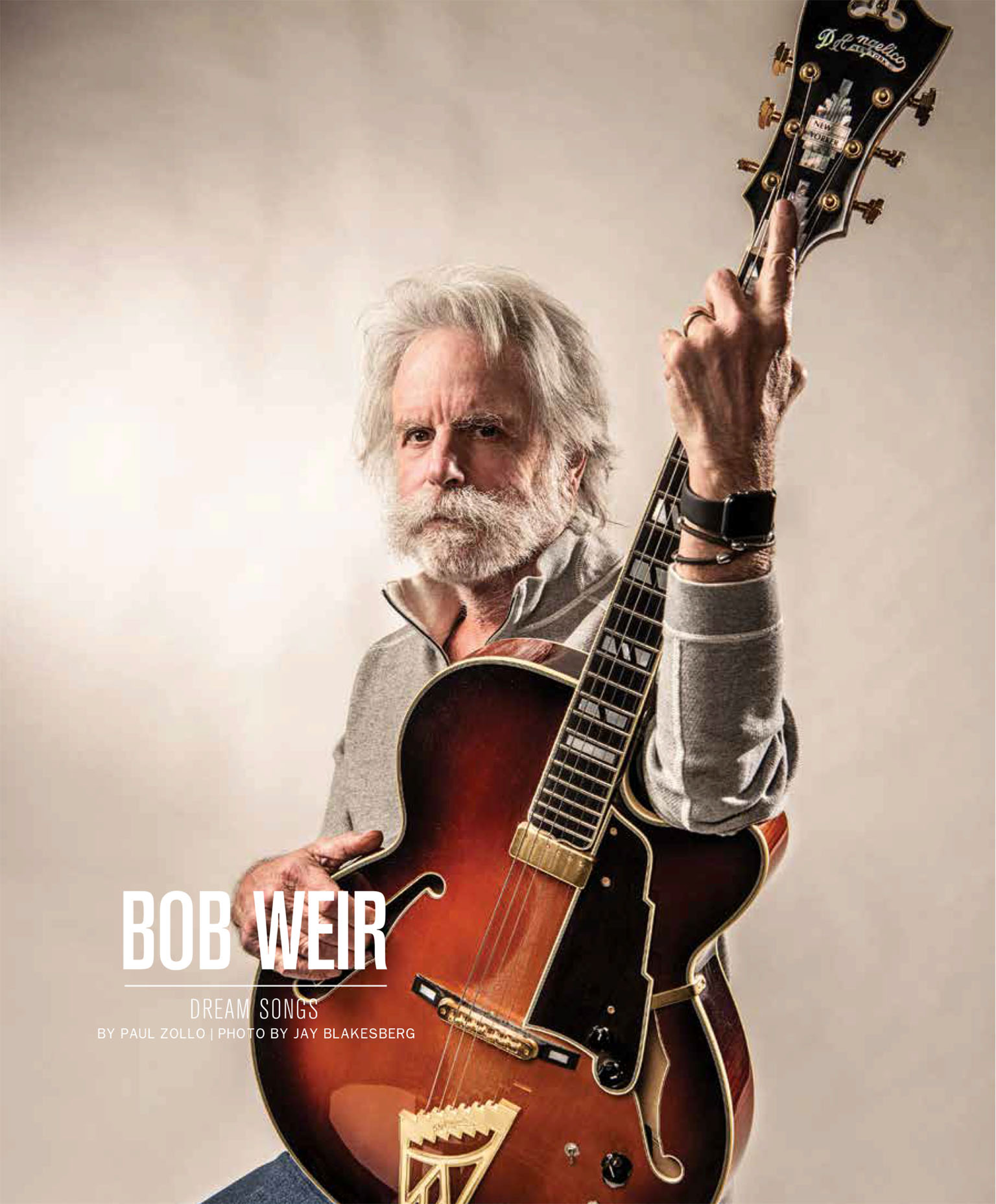
Members of The Beach Boys at Western Recorders Studio 3, Hollywood, during the recording of Pet Sounds (1965 or 1966).
From Left to Right: Bruce Johnston, Carl Wilson, Al Jardine, Dennis Wilson, Mike Love

crammed into a tiny two-bedroom house in a poor neighborhood," David Marks told Crowley. Marks lived across the street, was Carl's best friend and served as a Beach Boy for a while. "There was one bunk bed and one cot in the bedroom, and … they didn't really have any material possessions to speak of, other than the instruments in the music room. All the stuff you hear about Murry being a prick? For me, it was an average, normal household. My dad was a prick too, and all the dads in the neighborhood were pricks. The school of parenting for that generation [was] it was OK to smack your kid."

Like comic-book heroes, every rock and roll band has an origin story, and James B. Murphy tells such a tale in his book, *Becoming The Beach Boys: 1961-1963*. The prose is workmanlike, but the research is astonishing. Murphy provides far more detail about those three years than has ever been available before; everything from Murry's songwriting career to his sons' school years to the teenagers' first recording sessions is covered in exhaustive detail. This is not the place to begin your investigation of the Beach Boys, but it's the place every fanatic will end up.

The book inspired the similarly titled two-CD set *Becoming The Beach Boys*, which collects nearly every take recorded by the Beach Boys before they signed with Capitol Records, just eight months after the their first stabs at "Surfin'" in September 1961. No casual fan will want to hear nine similar takes of that song nor the eight takes of an early trifle called "Barbie." But the hard-core Beach Boys fan (this writer pleads guilty) will, and Murphy's liner notes supply the context.

What comes through in all these books is the truth that Brian didn't do it all alone. He possessed a rare talent and would have made fascinating music in any event, but that music may not have reached a broad audience without Love's stage charisma and R&B vocals, Carl's Chuck Berry guitar licks and gorgeous tenor, Dennis' surfing and hot-rodding experience, Al's Kingston Trio folk harmonies, the Wrecking Crew's virtuoso contributions and Murry's example and early push. On his own, Brian might have created the equivalent of the Manhattan Transfer singing the Bill Evan *Songbook*; with his collaborators, he rivaled the Beatles. ★



# BOB WEIR

## DREAM SONGS

BY PAUL ZOLLO | PHOTO BY JAY BLAKESBERG

IF NOT FOR FOLK MUSIC, there would be no Grateful Dead. Even before 1963, when the sound of Garcia's banjo drew him through Palo Alto alleyways like a moth towards his musical flame, Bob Weir was all about folk music. At 13, entirely in the sway of groups like the Kingston Trio, the Limelighters and Peter, Paul & Mary, he picked up a guitar and never put it down. Ancient musical tales of darkness and mayhem thrilled him, with details as rich as epic poetry, emboldened by tunes both timeless and heartfelt. Like other folkies, for him it was all about discovering old songs; the thought of writing new ones had yet to occur. "You know," he says with a laugh, "it hadn't come to my awareness yet that people actually were *writing* these songs. I'm not sure *where* I thought they came from."

It was New Year's Eve, 1963, when Weir was drawn to the siren call of that solo banjo. Turns out it emanated from the fingers of Jerry Garcia as he waited for one of his students to arrive at Dana Morgan's Music Store. The two musicians instantly bonded over their adoration for folk and jug-band music and spent that entire night jamming, a musical dialogue ultimately sustained over some 30 years, until Garcia's death in 1995. They were a jug-band first, called Mother McCree's Uptown Jug Champions; that morphed into The Warlocks and eventually, having gone electric, they became one of America's most iconic and beloved bands: The Grateful Dead.

It was an evolution entirely triggered by The Beatles, who similarly morphed from skiffle to rock and roll. "What [The Beatles] were doing," Weir said, "was impossibly attractive. I couldn't think of anything else more worth doing."

Today, although Garcia is physically gone, his generous and soulful spirit lives on in every show Weir performs, whether it's with a new amalgam of the Dead or with one of his own groups. Dead shows already were religious and devotional, a dynamic that has only deepened since the death of Garcia. His songs, his guitars, his records, his band, exist now almost as holy sacraments of a spirit unlike any other. Add to this sanctity the fact that the formerly boyish Bobby is now sporting the grizzled Garcia beard and taking on the mantle of elder rock statesman and you get the full surrealism of this evolving picture.

Our interview occurred on Halloween, the ideal day to interview this founding member of the Dead, for whom every day was Halloween. He called from his Northern California home, where, over a cup of tea, he spoke about his adventures in songwriting. As any Deadhead knows, Weir and Garcia rarely wrote songs together; apart from the very start of the Dead, when they would co-write, or when the band's arrangements of a Garcia tune warranted full songwriting credit, they worked on their own songs. Garcia usually worked with the lyricist Robert Hunter, while Weir worked mostly with John Barlow. It's when Weir first discovered songwriting that our discussion began.

**Bob Weir:** I was 18 when I first started writing. My very first one was sort of a rewrite of an old jug-band standard. I made it blues. I called it "Nickelwood Blues."

**That's a good way to start, using old songs to make new ones.**
True. It's like training wheels, I guess. It took me awhile to get into songwriting gear. The next one I wrote when I was 19 or 20. I started to get into writing with the other guys. I was writing in tandem with Jerry and Phil particularly. And Pigpen would chip in as well.

**What were the first songs you wrote with Jerry?**
"I Can't Come Down" was one of them. Stuff I don't think ever made it on record. They were our first attempts at songwriting.

**Since you and Jerry were in the band together, why did you decide to write separately?**
When Jerry was writing, he would do what *he* was gonna do. And then maybe he would bring it to the band and we would *arrange* it, more or less. So it was kind of a co-writing situation in that regard. And there was a lot of stuff we all co-wrote. Like "Thanksgiving," we all co-wrote that. About half of the tunes in the earlier years were stuff we all worked up together. We would work on them wherever we were rehearsing.

**Would you work on these with the whole band playing, or while sitting around with acoustic guitars?**
The whole band playing together. Back then we'd pretty much rehearse daily. A lot of that was just jamming. And from that came a lot of music that we turned into songs. Then we'd apply lyrics to them best we could. Until Hunter came along. Hunter changed that dynamic, because he was just better at it than we were. And then Barlow came along after that.

**Is that the way the songwriting process continued, that you would come up with music first and then Hunter or Barlow would write the words?**
It happened both ways. Sometimes music first, sometimes words first. And then there's the third way, which is actually best, where they both happen at the same time. But that was rare.

**Could that happen — both at once — while working with one of the lyricists?**
I think that happened a time or two with Robert Hunter, but I can't think of which tunes in particular. It *might* have been when we did "Truckin'." "Truckin'" was one we worked together.

If my memory serves me correctly, and it may not here, I think he was with us when we were working that one up. We were in Florida at a festival down there, and we had a day off, or a day when we weren't scheduled to play until later in the day. So we just sat around the pool — with acoustic guitars in this case — and came up with that one.

**Where did that title came from?**
I think Hunter had a fragment of a verse or a chorus for that and it was his. And we knew what we were going after, kind of, in that particular case.

**That song, like many of your classics, has a strong lyric as well as a great tune. What makes a melody durable?**
It has to do with how it marries with a lyric. And then how many, and in particular, where you place the leading tones in it. If you use a flat 7th or a suspended 4th or a suspended 2nd, where you place those leading tones affects the verisimilitude and coloration of the melody.

It also has to do with how you work the chords against it. For instance, you can create a lot of tension by incorporating leading tones but not letting them go where they want to take the harmonic structure of a song until it finally has to happen.

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REMNANTS
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NOTES OF BLUE
SON VOLT
NOTES OF BLUE
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**It is all about that dynamic of tension and release.**
Yes. All art is tension, and release. Light and dark. It's just a matter of how you play with it.

**That song, like so many, was written for both you and Jerry to sing together. Did that color how the songs were written, the dual vocals?**
Yes. Early on, Jerry and I worked up a lot of Everly Brothers tunes. And tunes of that nature, you know, country tunes. We patterned ourselves after the Everly Brothers [*laughs*]. Their style was fading then but they were hugely influential on us. Jerry and I had a similar range. Either one of us could catch the high part and the other guy could catch the melody. So we would create a back-and-forth in that regard, so each of us had ample time to sing the melody, and also take a break and sing the bird-call.

**The bird-call?**
The bird-call. The high part [*laughs*].

**When you would write a song with Hunter, would you give him guidance as to what the song is about?**
Finding out where that song *lives*, who the character is and what the character has to say is the crux of writing *any* song. There are innumerable ways of doing it. Start in the middle of the song, start at the beginning of the song, start at the end of the song, start with the music first and see what the music suggests. Which I did a lot. Or start with a fully rendered lyric and try to apply music *to* it. We worked in all those fashions.

**Were songs always coming for you, or were there better times for writing than others?**
With any kind of writing, you get hot and you get cold. Famous situation. There are times when you're just too damn busy, on the road for instance, too damn busy to write.

**Yet the Dead was on the road a lot. Do you mean you never wrote while you were on the road?**
A lot of time we would jam in-between songs on stage, and those jams sometimes became songs. We taped everything, and often listened to it back at night. We'd mark tunes that we wanted to get around to, or we would think about making it a song when we listened back to the tapes. And that would be a place where a song might want to live, so we would go with that.

**Can you remember how "Sugar Magnolia" was born?**
Yes. We'd just gotten back from touring with Delaney & Bonnie. I was sort of smitten with Delaney Bramlett's rhythm guitar playing. His style incorporated Cajun fiddle, using double-stop and triple-stop slurs into a note. So I worked up this little guitar part, the one you hear on the opening of the song. The rest of the song tumbled out. Hunter and I traded verses. He would write a verse and I would write a verse.

**I thought he wrote all the words.**
No [*laughs*]. I'm laughing chagrined, because I'm not *entirely* sure he liked where I took it. I had a girlfriend who was inspiring me at the time, and I took that and used it. When I did that, I just knew that I would be able to feel it to the end of time. If I took it where Hunter wanted me to take it, I knew it probably would have started to wither after a while. And for the song, I think I was right, despite Hunter's consternation, because I still love to sing it.

**"All art is tension, and release."**

**Because you injected it with personal truth, you connected with it more strongly?**
Right. I could just crawl right into it, no matter where I was emotionally, mentally or physically. I could just crawl right into that song and be 20 years old again. Or 21, maybe.

**So instilling personal truth into a song gives it more resonance?**
Yes. It adds a lot of resonance when you can directly relate to the character in the song; when the character is you or a statement of one's voice. Otherwise, with standard storytelling, if the character is not you, you have to find some place in you where the character resonates. But if the character *is* you then you can go look at your other stuff, other features, other little facets of who that character and/or you are.

**As listeners, we feel that, that this singer is the author of this story. It creates an existential dimension that's not there when a singer sings someone else's song.**
Right. "I've seen fire and I've seen rain" is a perfect example of that. Real simple lyric. The writer could deliver that with a resonance that made all that simplicity more or less elegiac.

**Do you remember writing "Jack Straw"?**
I had just read *Of Mice And Men* again. Hunter brought that lyric, and it was kind of a coincidence, if there is such a thing, that it had "we can share the women, we can share the wine." I liked that *immediately* and then I started to try to work the *Of Mice And Men* theme into it. I'm not sure if he had that in mind to begin with, but that is where it went to.

**You wrote "Hell In A Bucket" with Barlow. Was working with him different than working with Hunter?**
Not mechanically. All the same stuff happened. He would bring a lyric, or we would bring a shard of music. Or sometimes it would all spring forth at the same time every now and again.

With "Hell In A Bucket," we had that first verse which starts, "I was drinkin' last night with a biker, and I showed him a picture of you…" He had a mind for it. A sort of ¾ waltz-time drinking tune. But looking at The Grateful Dead's repertoire, it occurred to me that what we really needed was an up-tempo tune. So it led me to that kind of rhythm. And I think it worked out pretty well. And Barlow didn't object. At all.

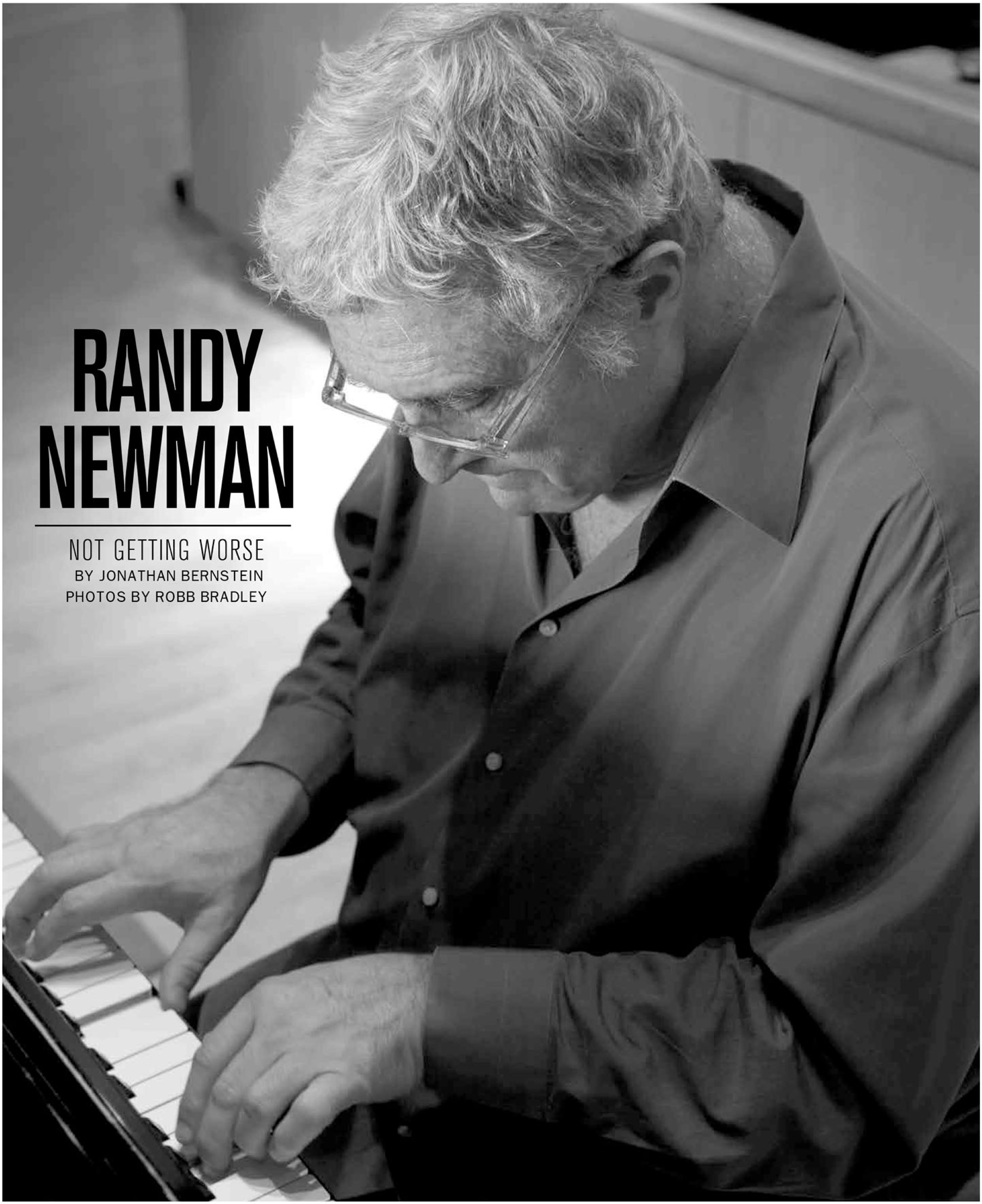
**So many songwriters feel their songs come through them, from another place. How do you feel?**
I'm pretty sure that songs come from the same world we go to when we're dreaming. At any moment a song can come from there. It's every bit as real when you're in there, as what we call reality here. I get the feeling I meet the characters that show up in the songs when I'm sleeping. And I develop a pregnant relationship with them, and get to know them before they have to pop out into this world and tell their stories.

**Do you have any routines for connecting with those stories?**
I wish there was some kind of method to it, but there really isn't. I do find that writing in the morning is the best time.

**Because you're still close to dream-time?**
That's my interpretation, yes.

**How do you best tap into that source?**
Well, I take the dream seriously. That's all I can say. They're very real. It's not just brain chatter. There's chatter involved in your daily thinking, that's all. But you know how people say it's just a dream, it's just a dream. There is no such thing. Dreams are every bit as real as any other part of your body.

Getting in touch with that, being in touch with that dream world, is a lifelong pursuit. As you're younger, you can train yourself to get better at it as you get older. Not just for art, but for any sort of endeavor. There's a lot that dreams can tell you. ★



# RANDY NEWMAN

## NOT GETTING WORSE

BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

PHOTOS BY ROBB BRADLEY

RANDY NEWMAN IS DESPONDENT. It's three months before the 2016 election, but the singer-songwriter has never felt more disconnected from the country he's spent his life studying, exploring and dissecting in song. "A large part of this country has really drifted apart. We've drifted all right," he says with a sigh during an interview this past July.

"You tend to think you know the country a bit. It's what I write about," he says. "It's what I'm interested in, and I think I know a lot about it, and not just where I live, not just Hollywood. I know there's fantastic life from coast to coast. I know the difference between Illinois and Mississippi. But I'm surprised by the amount of people that are for this guy. A lot of intelligent people are going to vote for him. I don't understand it."

Before long, Newman begins reciting lyrics over the phone, in his trademark growl, to "My Dick's Bigger Than Your Dick," a song he wrote about Donald Trump and has, at least for the time being, decided to keep for himself:

*My dick's bigger than your dick*
*It ain't lying if it's true*
*My dick's bigger than your dick*
*And I can prove it, too*

It's no surprise that President Trump would eventually serve as the narrator of a song penned by Randy Newman, a songwriter who's spent the better part of the last half-century turning popular music on its head with the simple, staggering notion that the protagonist of a pop song need not be decent, remotely sympathetic, or even mentally stable, let alone relatable. From the reactionary good ol' boy narrating 1974's "Rednecks," to the absurdist bigotry of 1977's "Short People," to the blindly blustering pride depicted in 1983's "I Love L.A.," Newman has made a career of exposing America's darkest urges and vilest impulses by displaying those very thoughts rather than condemning them from afar.

"I read an article recently that was saying that Trump is like characters in my songs," Newman says, singling out the racist, sexist, obscenely wealthy narrator of his 1983 song "My Life Is Good." "And it's true."

During the 2016 election, Newman did decide to release a first-person depiction of a different egomaniacal alpha-male. The song, "Putin," is a deranged sendup of the Russian president's nationalist hubris. Like Trump, Putin serves as a breathing example of the type of noxious masculine bravado Newman has been dissecting and scrutinizing in his story-songs since the late '60s.

"Putin" is also the lead single to Newman's long-awaited 2017 studio album, which will be the songwriter's first collection of original material since *Harps & Angels*, his frantic, fractured masterpiece released just months before Obama's election in 2008. Between his infamous perfectionism, his constant in-demand status as a film composer, and his self-described laziness, fans of the enigmatic Los Angeles songwriter have come to expect this long of a wait between albums. Since releasing *Land Of Dreams* in 1988, Newman has delivered roughly one studio album per decade.

"I've always wished that I made more records," says the singer. "Elton John made two records while I was lying in my backyard one summer."

At the moment, Newman is freshly invigorated by the impending release of his new record, and, at 73, he's as focused as ever on the work that still lies ahead. "At any given moment, I'm mainly interested in what I'm doing in the present," he says.

But as much as he looks forward, lately Newman has been forced to reflect on his lifelong body of work. Last fall, he released Volume Three of *The Randy Newman Songbook*, a career-spanning collection of the singer-songwriter performing material solo on piano. He also released an extensive box set compiling the entire *Songbook* series.

"Listening back to things I did 40 years ago compared to things I wrote five years ago, it basically sounds like the same guy. I didn't notice any particular decline, which I was very, very gratified by," says Newman, who late in his career has become preoccupied with the notion of artistic decline.

Newman's confidence in his ability to write as effectively as he did when he was in his 30s is what keeps him writing. Should that confidence ever erode, he'll promptly know when to stop. "It's what I'm interested in," he says plainly, "not getting worse."

Not getting worse is no small task for a songwriter with standards as notoriously high as Newman. As satisfying as it was to revisit older material for the *Songbook* series, it was also an agonizing experience for the singer, who's constantly noticing minute flaws and nagging imperfections in music he completed decades ago.

Mention any album from Randy Newman's discography, and chances are there's at least one song he wishes he could revise. "Jolly Coppers On Parade," from 1977's *Little Criminals*, should have had a different bridge. 1983's "Christmas In Capetown," a challenging account of South African apartheid sung from the perspective of a racist Englishman, would have made much more sense if it had been sung in an accent. Or "My Country," from 1999's *Bad Love*: despite thinking it's one of the best songs he's ever written, Newman refuses to play the song live because he can't stand the drawn-out tempo during the verses.

"I'm very rarely completely satisfied, so I just have to let things go," says the songwriter. "A lot of times you're not done writing the song, but somebody just takes them away from you, so you just finish. You've got to move on."

Newman's nitpicking hasn't ceased with time. He spent ages "poking" at his new batch of songs, several of which he says contain some of the most formally innovative and daring narrative structures of anything he's ever written.

Seeing Newman's perfectionism up close was an indispensable lesson for singer-songwriter, guitarist and producer Blake Mills, who was thrilled to get to work with Newman on the legendary songwriter's new album. "Seeing Randy labor over the small stuff reassured me of all the times I've gone back and forth over whether to use 'and' or 'but' in a song," says Mills. "Seeing how many re-harmonization possibilities he's juggling inside his head at all times was just devastating."

"Some of them took me a long time because they're so god-

damn complicated," Newman says of his forthcoming collection. One song, "Lost Without You," switches narration several times between a dying husband, his wife, and his children.

"It's not a step anyone else is going to be dumb enough to take, but it's what I do," he says.

"The writing has become more 'meta-Newman,'" Mills says of Newman's latest work. "He goes deeper inside his narrative styles to turn his own stories inside out. At times it even seems he's finally lost his mind, but he always lands the jump."

Another new song (working title: "The Only Bluesman In Heaven") is a complex story that imagines a beyond-the-grave dialogue between the two real-life blues musicians who were both named Sonny Boy Williamson:

*It's me speaking at you from the land beyond*
*I'm up here in heaven where I belong*
*Let me tell you a story about a man*
*who's down in hell*
*He ain't up here anyway*
*As far as I can tell*

*****

As a budding artist during the height of the sensitive singer-songwriter reign of the early- to mid-'70s, Randy Newman's classic albums like 1972's *Sail Away* and 1974's *Good Old Boys* found a devoted audience who thought his witty, unflattering portraits of unsavory romance and deep-seated American prejudice to be the work of genius.

But compared to peers like Carole King, Neil Young, Carly Simon, and John Denver, Newman's albums — filled with abrasive tales of slave-trade hucksters, sexually inept lovers, sinister propagandists, and alcoholic misanthropes in crisis — unsurprisingly only managed to sell a fraction of the albums than those of his peers who wrote songs from far more endearing perspectives.

"I try to eliminate myself from the song, but maybe the medium is not meant to do it. It's more of an immediate medium," he says. "A favorite song of lots of fans of mine is 'Feels Like Home,' and that's just a direct love song. It's really what people like, but it's not what's interested me quite as much."

After decades of honing his craft for a relatively niche audience, today Randy Newman's songwriting sensibilities can be heard across the wide spectrum of pop music. Newman himself is far too self-deprecating to attribute any of this to his own influence, but even he admits that purely character-based first-person songwriting from distasteful narrators is much more common, or at least permissible, than it used to be.

Newman hears this sensibility most readily in rappers like Kanye West and Eminem, both of whom he greatly admires. He's heard it in young rock acts like JR JR (formerly Dale Earnhardt Jr. Jr.), but for the most part, he just takes the word of his old friend and former Warner Brothers executive Lenny Waronker at face value when Waronker tells him about all the young songwriters and artists these days who list Newman as their songwriting hero.

"It never sinks in with me, particularly. I never exactly experienced it much myself. I'm sort of isolated," Newman says of his peers' adulation.

Even in the smaller world of contemporary roots-leaning singer-songwriters, Newman's influence is as widespread as it's ever been. Some, like Father John Misty, take directly from Newman's playbook and embrace alter egos and disreputable first-person narration. Others, like Dawes' Taylor Goldsmith, Courtney Barnett, Robert Ellis, Houndmouth's Matt Myers, Lydia Loveless and Blake Mills, all write in a style that's deeply indebted to Newman's radically off-kilter template for literary pop narration.

Mills, for one, has described one of his songs, "Cry To Laugh," as a "standard Randy Newman rip-off."

**"So many songwriters have learned about narration and irony and satire from him in subtle ways."**
**-Blake Mills**

"He's so in his own world, but so many songwriters have learned about narration and irony and satire from him in subtle ways," says Mills. "I hear traces of his influence everywhere."

"Maybe it's just because I'm exposed to people like Randy Newman, but I don't really understand why the narrator in a song always has to be the hero and emerge victorious. That's not the way I write, and that's not the way I listen to music," says Robert Ellis, whose incisive songwriting often gets compared to Newman's. Like Newman, Ellis is "not really interested in the sentiment of 'I love you.' That's what I like about Randy's songs: even if it's a love song, it's coming from some fucked-up perspective."

Ellis vividly remembers the time he briefly met his songwriting hero. He was playing nearby Newman on the same night in Brussels and managed to get backstage to meet the songwriter after each of their shows. "I was just like, 'I'm a really big fan, I love your music,' all the normal fanboy stuff, and then I told him that I had played 'Rider In The Rain' [from Newman's 1977 album *Little Criminals*] earlier that night." Newman looked at Ellis and replied, "Well, I'm glad somebody's playing it."

*****

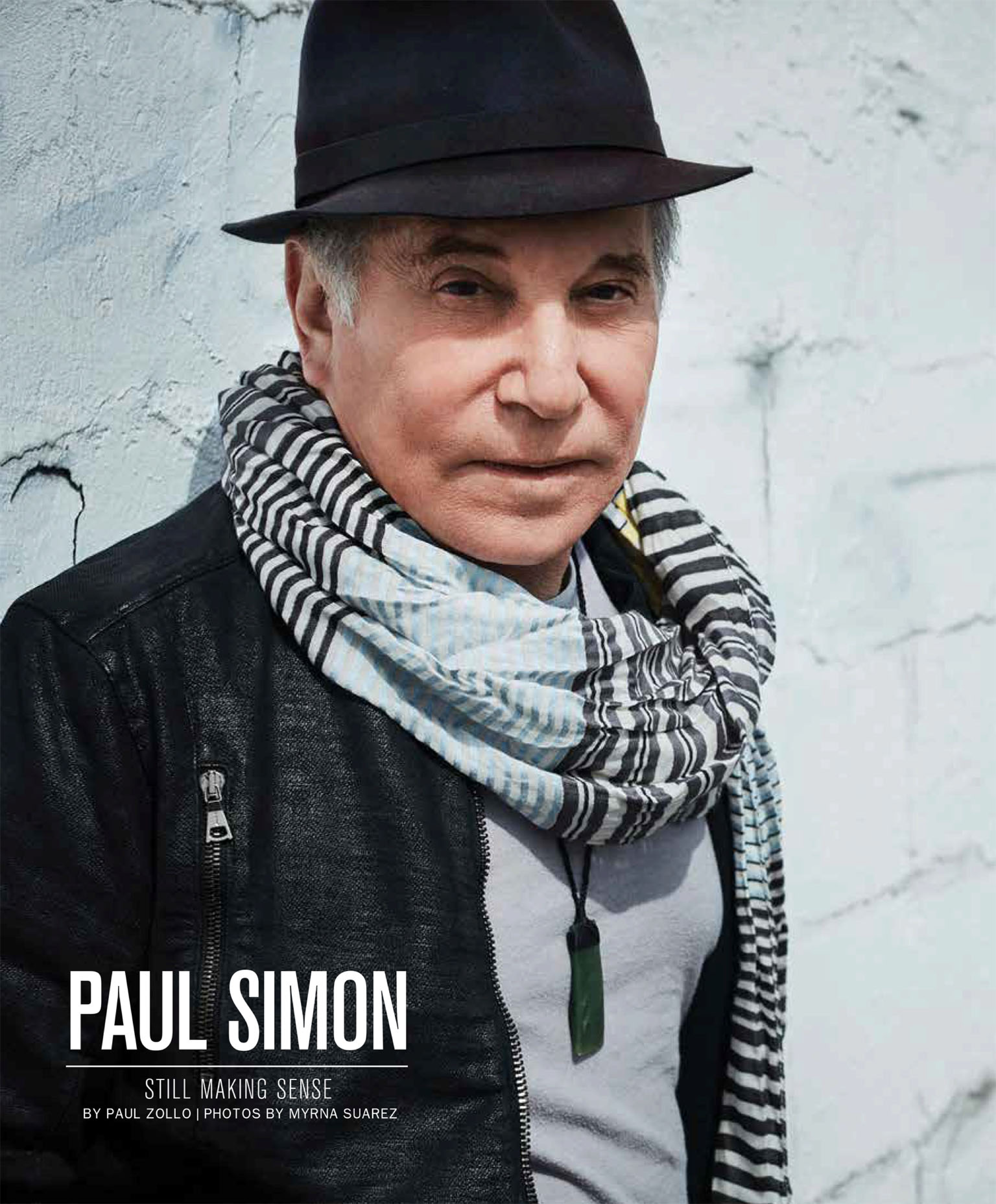
For all that's made of his lyrics, Randy Newman, born into a family of film composers, still most enjoys the time he spends arranging, conducting, and playing music with professional session musicians. Whether he's working on a film or his own albums, these days, "the only thing that I love about writing songs are the days I spend with the orchestra, not to have power and wave a stick around in my hand, but to make music with people who are so superior as musicians and as players. It's a reason to keep going."

Newman readily admits that he's struggled to write consistently throughout his career. "Some people say, 'I don't know what I'd do if I didn't write,' but sometimes I don't think I need to," he says. By now, he knows that songwriting is primarily a matter of discipline. "You have to show up every day for it," he says. His other crucial tip? Seek out external encouragement.

"A real good writer will always be hard on himself, but you can't let the critic become greater than the creative part in you. I was very lucky to have Lenny Waronker early on, because when I played something for him, he was enthusiastic about it," Newman says. "You often lose enthusiasm yourself. You write something and then two days later you wonder, 'What the hell was I doing?' I do agonize, and take the work with me away from where I'm writing, but what you can't do is make a work of art of your life."

For all his self-scrutiny and eternal dissatisfaction, when Newman looks back now on his half-century of songwriting, he can see, with clarity and gratitude, that his eternal neurosis has, in a truly astonishing, inexplicable way, paid off.

"It's amazing to me that the stuff I did so long ago is still … that people still know it and like it. It really is. I never would have thought that. That's what happens with songwriters: you do something in a little room by yourself, and then it's out there in the world, the product of nothing but your own mind." ★



# PAUL SIMON

## STILL MAKING SENSE

BY PAUL ZOLLO | PHOTOS BY MYRNA SUAREZ

"SO I WAS COMING OUT OF MY GYM," Paul Simon says, "and I overheard this guy say, 'Well, should I get extra fries to compensate for the lack of nuggets?' And I thought, 'What a great question!' What a great existential question to somebody! What a metaphor for everything!"

In sunny Beverly Hills to discuss his latest masterpiece *Stranger To Stranger*, and just days short of his 75th birthday, Simon discussed the origins of the new songs, and the unprecedented ways in which he challenges himself to create fresh work.

Like any savvy songwriter, Simon's always keen to collect modern yet timeless turns of phrase that make sense of the present. So when he heard the nuggets comment, he knew he had something. And being Simon, he instantly recognized the pleasing sonics of the thing, the funny colloquial equation, and its broader implications. Soon he'd woven it into the darkly comic lyric of the opening song of the album, "The Werewolf."

He's been finding these metaphors for modern times for a long time now, ever since "The Sound Of Silence" emerged in 1964, surprising both the author and his partner, Art Garfunkel, with its expansive poetics. And ever since, whether in the duo or solo, he's consistently crafted remarkable songs, songs that have expanded our ideas of what songwriting can do.

He loves his work. Asked how he maintains such a high standard, he says it's because he's "still interested," and because, "it's all [he does]." It also stems from his boundless hunger to discover new sounds, new words, new ways of shaping songs and records. On *Stranger*, he's combined backwards masking of old gospel quartets, Harry Partch's mysterious micro-tonal instruments, techno dance/hip-hop textures and the rhythms of flamenco dancing and clapping. And though that might sound like some crazy gumbo, in this artist's hands it is a beautiful collage, a piece of work which goes a long way in doing that which songwriters do best: making some sense out of modern times. It's there that our discussion, conducted over herbal tea and punctuated by frequent laughter, commenced.

**You've always had a great capacity to use modern, timely details in songs, and yet with timeless grace, as in "The Boy In The Bubble." These new songs are all very much of the moment, such as "Wristband," which uses a modern symbol as a perfect metaphor for class division.**

Yes. "Wristband" starts off as a story and then I said, "Well, where does the story go? What about this guy?" It wasn't me; that never happened to me. Could have, easily. But it never did.

So I said, "What am I gonna do with this guy?" And I thought, "Maybe the people on the line who are waiting to get in, do they get angry? Do they riot? Do the police come because there's a riot?" And I said, "Nah, that's not an interesting story."

But for some reason, the riots started slowly. I said, "Oh, the wristband, it's a metaphor." That's how that song becomes of the moment, because people are talking about the discrepancy in wealth.

**And you bring that dynamic home in that section with the virtuoso rhyming, with "can't afford the cool brand/ whose anger is a shorthand."**

"Shorthand" was the key there. That was the one that wouldn't immediately pop into my mind. That gave me that extra rhyme that I needed to keep it going as a rhythm.

**It's a cool structure, in that you're a king of sophisticated chord changes, yet this entire song is on one chord, an E flat.**

I never even thought about it. I never even put chords to it. I never intended to put anything other than the bass, so other than the key, I never even thought about changes. It was always this clapping that came from flamenco players. That was my rhythmic premise that started the album. Those little fills in "Stranger To Stranger" — those are a guy's feet dancing. They're odd-sounding. It's a guy tapping his feet. It's not a hand rhythm. It's a feet pattern. It's a different thing.

**"Werewolf" also has very few chords. It stays on the I chord so long that when you finally shift to the IV, it is momentous.**

Right. The rhythm tunes have less changes. It depends. If you go back to the early ones — "The Sound Of Silence" is a really pretty melody and that has very simple changes. They just repeat. There's not even a variation on anything.

**Folk music changes.**

Yeah. But "Still Crazy," which has a good melody, has changes, makes a modulation.

**Many. I was always aware of the modulation from G to A in the bridge and final verse, but just recently realized you start the whole song in A and then you go to G for the first verse.**

Yes. I started the song in G, and wrote that bridge in A. So I then took the bridge section as an introduction, after it was written.

It's funny, that's one of several of my songs that I gave over to be played on piano, and I can't remember what the chords are anymore. Because I never play them. I don't know what the chords are to "Still Crazy." I could figure it out, but I don't know what they are. If somebody said, "Play 'Still Crazy' on the guitar," I couldn't play it.

**I could show you.**

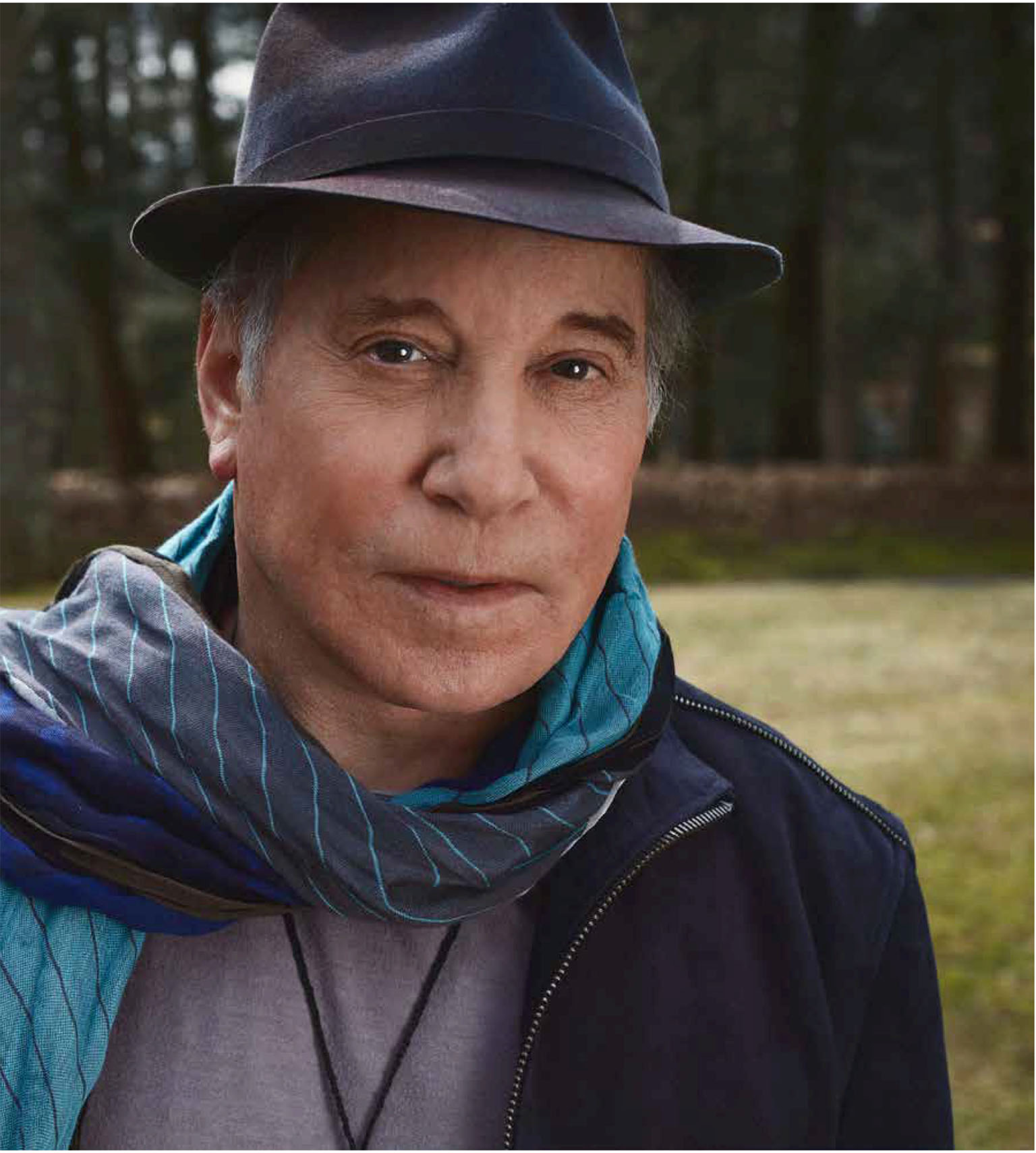
[*Laughs*] Thanks.

**The song "Stranger To Stranger,"— wow! [*Laughs*] That's a good question — "wow." But it fits.**

That's why I named the album after it. I thought it was *the* piece on the album.

**It has that beautiful, haunting section: "I'm just jittery, it's just a way of dealing with my joy."**

"Jittery." That's a good word. And it's true, too. It's one of the things that we do;



when things get really good, we start to get nervous. Some people do. They think, "Uh-oh, I'm not going to make a fuss about this because I don't want to change my luck." So things are good, so you get jittery. "Jittery" is great, because it means what it sounds like. And "just jittery" — you get the two Js in a row.

**That line is very human.**
It's not a very joyous time. But nevertheless, it's a part of human nature to have joy, so it's in there too. It just makes you nervous.

**And you use "words and melody" as the metaphor for love. Also "easy harmony."**
I think the "words and melody" part came first. I didn't want the song to be called "Words And Melody." That's one where I don't know where the words come from. They just come.

**"Stranger" has a glorious melody. Years ago you said we're long out of the age of melody; yet it seems great melodies are loved as much as ever.**
Yeah, I think that's in our DNA. I think if I were to amend that statement I would say that melodies now are much shorter in popular music. It's more like hooks than long melodies.

**Do you have any idea why certain melodies are strong?**
No. I think that's the great mystery. If people knew what the secret to a great melody was, they'd write great melodies all the time.

I mean, there are times when you could say, "This song should be more melodic," such as using wider intervals or bigger leaps. And that may improve the song but it doesn't make for a great melody, necessarily. It may fix a song that has no melody, but there's no way of knowing. Because it seems like the great melodies always surprise you.

**Homelessness comes up in many songs, such as "Street Angel."**
The song "Street Angel" is a track of flamenco clappers with a gospel quartet from the late '30s slowed down and played backwards. The sounds of it backwards are the words that I'm using, that sounded like "street angel." That is where the title came from. I heard it in the reverse voices.

So I said, "Okay, it's a song about a street angel. What can I say about a street angel?" And every time there would be some backwards phrase that sounded like something, I'd write it in there. "I'd give it away for the hoot of it." Some backwards thing that sounds like that, and I keep going. "Took him away in an ambulance." These are all backwards things. It made the story.

So the story's coming in, I'm filling it in. The only set piece in there is "God goes fishing." That was a set piece that I had written. It was in my notes. I didn't have a place for it, but I had it ready to go somewhere. So I put it in there. Otherwise, I'm taking the information from this backwards track.

**How did you land on this approach?**
Because it's kind of exciting. It's almost a game. You fill in the story. I'll give you a word, and then I'll give you another word and you connect the two.

**I assumed the "hoot of it" and its rhyming lines were you having fun with language.**
I was. But it sounded like "the hoot." And then the rest of it unfolded: "I give it away for the hoot of it/ I tell my tale for the toot of it/ I wear my suit for the suit of it."

I have all of that, and then it becomes time to make a point. "The tree is bare but the root of it." Which goes deeper than logical reasoning.

And then you're into "God goes fishing." So you're taking random things and then you're making them not random and collecting them in a logical way. It's like a collage that suddenly becomes a narrative and then goes back to a collage. One section, I just leave the mumbling. Just the mumbling was interesting enough in itself. "And then they took him away in the ambulance."

And then I jump to the same character in a later song, "In A Parade," where he's no longer mystical, now he's schizophrenic. So when the words "Street Angel" came to me, I actually thought of people on the street, but I didn't see the people on the street and say, "Oh, they're street angels." It was the other way.

**And that crystallizes so much of what we've learned about songwriting from you, that it's both following and leading at the same time, both conscious and unconscious.**
Right. You're swinging back and forth and you're changing subjects kind of rapidly while the rhythm is still good.

**Much of this process is taking random elements and shaping them into an inevitable whole. Michelangelo famously said that while carving marble, there was an essential figure inside and he just had to cut away the excess. Do you feel that with songs, that there's an essential song there? Or could it go in different ways?**
More towards "there's an essential song there." But not necessarily. It's a lot easier to change direction in a song than in mid-statue.

**Yeah, you don't have to worry about breaking the marble.**
Right [*laughs*].

**"Late In The Evening," [from the 1980 album *One-Trick Pony*] for example, seems like a perfect song. Yet you have changed some of the lyrics. Do you remember writing it?**
Yes. We were jamming on "Mystery Train," and [bassist] Tony Levin came up with that bass line. And [drummer] Steve Gadd was playing the part with the two sticks in each hand.

Then Dave Grusin wrote the horn part, which was great, except I thought, "Sounds like a mariachi kind of horn part," which doesn't fit what the song is. But it sounds so good, might as well keep it. And it stayed. I thought it sounded great, but it didn't fit. I mentioned the streets though. Doo-wop, a cappella music in the streets. But I think maybe because in my mind I was basing it on "Mystery Train." I was just surprised to hear that.

**You changed the lyric live to playing "rhythm" not "lead" guitar.**
Yeah. It's hard to for me to say I play lead guitar when I don't.

**"Werewolf" is a funny and edgy opener. Like "You Can Call Me Al" and others, it starts as a joke and then broadens.**
Yeah, the first line of the record is a joke.

**Leading to, "she killed him; sushi knife." Which is all about the delivery, and your comic timing.**
I'll bet I did that line 50 times to try and get the joke in. If you don't toss it off in the right way, it's not actually funny.

**Then that passage, "the fact is most obits are mixed reviews/ life is a lottery, a lot of people lose …"**
Nobody's picked up yet that I'm using the word "lot" twice. That's why it's a lottery, because a lot of people lose.

**"In A Parade" has a beautiful repeating litany in which you discuss the guy's diagnosis, and even his meds.**
Yeah, I went to the hospital. We left the street angel; we took him away in an ambulance. So first I thought, "Well, I'll pick up the song in the ambulance." Well, maybe not. Maybe it'll be like the ambulance is coming into the ER.

So I went to the ER room to record some ambient sound. I spoke to the doctor dealing with people out of touch with reality. I asked, "What do you give them?" She said, "Seroquel."

**Seroquel sounds like an ancient jewel.**
Yes. And it has a partial rhyme with "angel." It really works.

**The guy says he can't talk, because he's in a parade. Which seems like the essence of modern times. Just enough time to say you don't have enough time.**
Yeah, I know. And it's a perfect loony line. It's delusional. He's not in a parade. "I can't talk now/ I'm in a parade" is hilarious and delusional at the same time.

**And real. Life feels like that.**
Of course. That's where the delusion comes from. ★

# LEONARD COHEN

## A REVELATION IN THE HEART

BY PAUL ZOLLO
PHOTO BY ADAM COHEN

"IF I KNEW WHERE THE GREAT SONGS CAME FROM," Leonard Cohen famously said, "I would go there more often." In fact, during his 82 years of life, he went there a whole lot more than most humans ever do, and with a devotion to songwriting almost religious in its fervor, resulting in a bounty of miracle songs.

That songwriting for him was more of a calling than a job was never more evident than in this final year of his life when, immobilized and in great pain, knowing the end was near, he devoted himself to one final task: writing and recording a new album of songs. It's a mission accomplished, as he released the remarkable *You Want It Darker* earlier this year in the final month of his life. Produced with his son, Adam Cohen, it's his ultimate masterpiece, the final brick in his Tower of Song.

Weakened by illness, rather than do a series of interviews to promote the album, he decided to do one single press event where journalists from around the world, including a few lucky Americans like this writer, were invited. Held at the Canadian Consulate in the stately Hancock Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, it was a remarkable night of reverence and love for Cohen, peopled only by those writers who have been devoted to him for decades, as well as a few famous friends and collaborators.

"There was something holy about it," said the Anglo-Greek singer-songwriter Athena Andreadis, who sang the haunting background vocals on "Traveling Light," a track from the new album. "I have never felt anything quite like it. It was his final gift to us, and such a beautiful one. Just to be in his presence was a great privilege, and to share this delivery of his final work. I will never forget it."

The press event happened October 13, which was also the 75th birthday of Paul Simon, and the day the news broke that Dylan had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. But throughout the night, one comment kept popping up among the press: "If they gave that award to any songwriter, it should have been *Leonard*."

The truth is, Dylan would probably agree. Throughout the decades he has consistently sung Cohen's praises, saying at one point that Cohen wasn't even writing songs anymore, he was writing prayers. Cohen, in return, has expressed great awe at Dylan's work and his vast range. "That kind of genius," he said, "can manifest all the forms and styles."

More recently, Dylan pointed out that when people talk of Cohen, they speak only of the words, but that his music mattered just as much. It's true, of course, and points to the fact that these are songs, not poems. Sure, Cohen would always joke about his own limitations as a musician ("Every guitarist has chops," he said. "Me, I only have one chop. But it's a good one."), yet he composed music of great grace and power, as simple and elegant as his words. "Hallelujah" would never have become a standard if not for that ingenious ascending melody, which matches the words impeccably, and goes straight to the heart.

The truth remains that, unlike almost every songwriter who arrived in Dylan's wake and was affected forever by him, Cohen was on his own spiritual and poetic path from the start. As the poet Allen Ginsberg said, "When Dylan came out, he blew everyone's mind. Everyone except Leonard Cohen, that is."

On this night, after dinner and drinks amid candles under moonlight, with poster-sized passages of his lyrics from the new album illuminated throughout the garden, we were ushered into a small chapel-like space for a listening session. Handed lyric books, we all sat in silence, united by the presence of greatness, and in awe of the realms he could access even while fighting for his life. His voice, surrounded by his son's production, resounded more deeply than ever, resonating like the voice of God himself.

When the album was over (and many were still drying their tears), the great man himself appeared at the back of the room, in a dark suit and fedora, walking with a cane. The whole room rose to its feet and cheered. He slowly walked down the aisle, as if at a wedding, smiling that beatific Cohen smile.

Before anyone could ask a question, he addressed the assembled crowd, and, as was his way, opened with a joke. "Some of you have come from a long, long way to be here and I appreciate it," he said. "Some of you have driven across Los Angeles, which takes about the same time."

The first question concerned his health, as he'd made recent statements about the end being near. Again his whimsical charm surfaced. "I said I was ready to die, recently. And I think I was *exaggerating*." Huge laughter erupted, with some sense of relief that maybe he was out of the darkness. Then he added, "I've always been into self-dramatization. I intend to live *forever*." We cheered. We believed him because we wanted to. Rarely have I felt that kind of unanimous love and awe for an artist, and it was clear that Cohen felt it, too.

One month to this day he was gone. Although he promised eternity, his recognition of death's imminence was already spelled out in the songs we had just heard, as it was in the second answer he offered that night.

"If you're *lucky*," he said, "you can keep the vehicle healthy and responsive over the years. If you're lucky. Your own intentions have very little to do with this. You can keep the body as well-oiled and receptive as possible. But whether you're actually going to be able to go for the long haul is really not your own choice."

He was a humble man, but never falsely so. He embraced the greatness of his work with a kind of parental pride more than any sense of ownership. When asked how he maintained such excellence throughout the decades, he said, "I don't know, but I think that as any songwriter knows, and I think Bob Dylan knows this better than any of us, you don't write the songs anyhow."

Back in 1992 when I first interviewed him and admitted that "Suzanne" seemed like a songwriting miracle, he didn't disagree. "It *is* a miracle," he said, and then first delivered his great "If I knew where the great songs came from" line. But this first time around, it came with an addendum. "It's much like the life of a Catholic nun," he said. "You're married to a mystery."

It's a mystery he's embraced over his career with unflagging fidelity. Even in his last years, when the pain made it impossible to play an instrument, he never stopped writing. Instead, he wrote mostly just words, and turned to Adam, and to songwriters Sharon Robinson and Patrick Leonard, to compose music for his lyrics.

"I felt like the luckiest guy in the world," Patrick Leonard said. "Here Leonard Cohen is sending *me* lyrics. It was *amazing* to me. Still is." Some of the songs, Patrick Leonard said, took a full seven years to complete. "But it was mostly him changing small words. He would work and rework a lyric a thousand times to get it perfect."

Asked how Cohen responded to his music, he said, "When he liked something, he would email me *right away*. If he didn't like it, I would hear *nothing*. And I would know

it was time to start over."

Cohen, however, was quick to establish on this night that there was nothing heroic about taking years to write a single song. "The fact that my songs take a long time to write," he said, "is no guarantee of their excellence. It just takes a long time for me. I'm very slow. It comes by dribbles and drops. Some people are graced with a flow. Some people are graced with something less than a flow. I'm one of those."

When repeatedly pressed to disclose his working methods, he said the process remains as mysterious as when he began, but that the work has grown even harder. The only personal detail divulged was that he long ago learned to keep his surroundings sparse and simple to counter the chaos in his mind.

"Everybody has a kind of magical system that they employ in the hopes that this will open up the channels," he said. "My mind was always very cluttered so I took great pains to simplify my environment. Because if my environment were half as cluttered as my mind, I wouldn't be able to make it from room to room. This system has worked for me, even though I have had to sweat over every word. That's just me. For some people it comes faster, for some it comes slower."

This echoed a statement he made in our first interview. "My immediate realm of thought is bureaucratic and like a traffic jam," he said. "My ordinary state of mind is very much like the waiting room at the DMV… So to penetrate this chattering and this meaningless debate that is occupying most of my attention, I have to come up with something that really speaks to my deepest interest. Otherwise I just nod off in one way or another. So to find that song, that urgent song, takes a lot of versions and a lot of work and a lot of sweat."

"That urgent song." There, in that phrase, is the yearning, the boundless appetite, to realize that song completely. Yet despite this urgency and ambition, he was never one to subscribe to the school of instant songwriting, of writing and recording something immediately to capture its essence. Quite the opposite. He believed in the power of work, and questioned the very premise of inspiration.

**"Whether you're actually going to be able to go for the long haul is really not your own choice."**

"Why shouldn't my work be hard? Almost everybody's work is hard. One is distracted by this notion that there is such a thing as inspiration, that it comes fast and easy. And some people are graced by that style. I'm not. So I have to work as hard as any stiff, to come up with the payload."

His obsession with Sisyphean labor surfaced many times, as he described himself as a prisoner of song, forced to work or perish. "Freedom and restriction," he said, "are just luxurious terms to one who is locked in a dungeon in the tower of song. These are just … ideas. I don't have the sense of restriction or freedom. I just have the sense of work. I have the sense of hard labor."

Yet, despite that self-portrait, it was clear his greatest contentment was not just in the finished song, but in the process itself. "I think unemployment is the great affliction of man," he said in '92. "Even people with jobs are unemployed. In fact, most people with jobs are unemployed. I can say, happily and gratefully, that I am fully employed … We have a sense here that it's smart not to work. The hustle, the con, these have been elevated to a very high position in our morality. And probably if I could mount a con or a hustle in terms of my own work I would … But I am a working stiff. It takes me months and months of full employment to break the code of the song. To find out if there can *be* a song there."

Asked how he broke that code, he offered his vision of what songwriting is.

"I try *anything* that I can bring to it," he said. "Thought, meditation, drinking, disillusion, insomnia, vacations. Because once the song enters the mill, it's worked on by everything that I can summon. And I need *everything*. I try *everything*. I try to ignore it, try to repress it, try to get high, try to get intoxicated, try to get sober, all the versions of myself that I can summon are summoned to participate in this project, this work force."

"In your experience, do *any* of these things work better than others?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Nothing works. *Nothing* works. After a while, if you stick with a song long enough it will yield. But long enough is way *beyond* any reasonable estimation of what you think long enough may be. In fact, long enough is way beyond. It's abandoning that idea of what you think long enough may be."

The title song of *You Want It Darker* revolves around the image of a flame being extinguished, a poignant symbol of death. Ostensibly a song of darkness, it's also one of acceptance, of readying one's self for the end.

*Magnified and sanctified*
*Be Thy Holy Name*
*Vilified and crucified*
*In the human frame*
*A million candles burning*
*For the help that never came*
*You want it darker*
*We kill the flame*

*Hineni Hineni*
*I'm ready, my Lord.*

*Hineni*, in the ancient Hebrew of his ancestors, means "I'm here," followed in English with, "I'm ready, my Lord."

When asked about this, he said, "I don't really know the genesis, the origin, enabling that declaration of readiness, no matter what the outcome. That is a part of everyone's soul. We all are motivated by deep impulses and deep appetites to serve, even though we may not be able to locate that which we are willing to serve. So this is just a part of my nature. And I think it would also be my nature to offer one's self when the emergency becomes articulate. It's only when the emergency becomes articulate that we can locate that willingness to serve."

A kind of stunned silence followed, as the crowd absorbed the fullness of what he had said. Sensing this, he added, "That's getting too heavy. I'm sorry. *Strike* that." Much laughter. Even weakened, his voice softer than ever, the man knew how to work a crowd.

When asked his opinion of Dylan's award, he said, "To me, giving that award to Dylan is like pinning a medal on Mt. Everest for being the highest mountain."

When Adam took the stage to sit next to his father, Cohen smiled with an exultant openness rarely revealed in photos. "My *son*," he said with glee, and the whole room laughed. Adam, he said, was both a gifted singer-songwriter and producer, and came in to rescue this album when it might have gone unfinished. "To have this kind of microscopic attention to my music," the

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elder Cohen said, "was very great."

Adam, who produced the album and co-wrote "Traveling Light" with his father and Patrick Leonard, evoked gratitude for his life with Cohen, and for the opportunity to work so closely with him. "Just to be in my father's company, for me," he said, "was a great privilege."

To which Cohen quipped, to much laughter, "Truth is, we're *not* a very tight family."

The moment Cohen decided to devote his entire life to songwriting, he said in '92, was when he spent months working on the song "Suzanne."

"At a certain point I realized I only had one ball in my hand, and that was the *song*," he said. "Everything else had been wrecked or compromised and I couldn't go back, and I was a one-ball juggler. I'd do incredible things with that ball to justify the absurdity of the presentation. Because what are you going to do with that ball? You don't have three anymore. You've just got one. And maybe only one arm.

What are you going to do? You can flip it off your wrist, or bounce it off your head. You have to come up with some pretty good moves. You have to learn them from scratch. And that's what I learned, that you have to learn them from scratch."

This dedication never waned. Often he'd labor for months working on one verse alone, only to discard it, as he did with many from the epic "Democracy" from 1992's *The Future*. He shared some of these discards with me, all of which were faithfully archived in bound journals, and said, "I'm very happy to be able to speak this way to fellow craftsmen. Some people may find it encouraging to see how slow and painstaking is the process." Then he showed this:

*From the church where the outcasts can hide*
*Or the mosque where the blood is dignified.*
*Like the fingers on your hand,*
*Like the hourglass of sand,*
*We can separate but not divide*
*From the eye above the pyramid*
*And the dollar's cruel display*
*From the law behind the law,*
*Behind the law we still obey*
*Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.*

When asked why he would write something so compelling only to abandon it, his answer was as eloquent as the lyric itself. "Because I didn't want to compromise the anthemic, hymn-like quality," he said."I didn't want it to get too punchy. I didn't want to start a fight in the song. I wanted a revelation in the heart rather than a confrontation or a call-to-arms or a defense."

A revelation in the heart. A dynamic that has hummed throughout all his songs since the beginning, this luminous juncture of brilliance and heart. As he wrote in a verse he didn't cut from "Democracy": "And it's here the family's broken and it's here the lonely say/ the heart has got to open in a fundamental way." His was an open heart.

Even his explanation of his need to fully develop a verse before rejecting it was poignant. "Before I can discard a verse," he said, "I have to write it. Even if it's bad. And it's just as hard to write a bad verse as a good verse. I can't discard a verse before it is written because it is the writing of the verse that produces whatever delights or interests or facets that are going to catch the light. The cutting of the gem has to be finished before you can see whether it shines."

That the work became his religion is evident to anyone who knows the songs, which resonate with holiness and deep, ancient wisdom. As Dylan explained, these songs all resound with timeless sanctity. At the final event, Cohen explained that although the Bible and religion have informed and shaped his songs over the years, it was always the *work*, more than anything, which was his religion.

"I've never thought of myself as a religious person," he said. "I don't have any spiritual strategy. I kind of limped along, as so many of us do in these realms. Occasionally I have felt the grace of another presence in my life. But I can't build any kind of spiritual structure on that."

But when it comes to the work, the songs themselves, it is there that the Bible matters most. "I feel that this is a vocabulary that I grew up with," he said. "This Biblical landscape is very familiar to me, and it's natural that I use those landmarks as references. Once they were universal references and everybody understood and knew them and repeated them. That's no longer the case today. But it is still my landscape. I try to make those references. I try to make sure they're not too obscure. But outside of that I dare not claim anything in the spiritual realm as my own."

Regarding his perpetual aim for perfection, his answer echoed both Dylan and The Bible:

"At a certain point," he said, "when the Jews were first commanded to raise an altar, the commandment was on unhewn stone. Apparently the god that wanted that particular altar didn't want slick, didn't want smooth. He wanted an unhewn stone placed on another unhewn stone … Now I think Dylan has lines, hundreds of great lines that have the feel of unhewn stone. But they *really* fit in there. But they're not smoothed out. It's inspired but not polished."

Cohen, however, as we know, would polish his stones until they shone like diamonds. Rarely did they reveal any axe-marks, especially these final ones. To the very end his objective remained to work and rework the songs to a realm of almost impossible perfection, each one built tight as a brick, never a wasted word. On these last songs, each lyric is compressed into compact, essential lines, perfectly metered and rhymed. The brevity of the lines, as if delivered by someone short of breath, not long for this world, is hauntingly poignant.

*But if the road*
*Leads back to you*
*Must I forget*
*The things I knew*
*When I was friends*
*With one or two*
*Traveling light like*
*We used to do*
*I'm traveling light*

At the conclusion of our last night with him, he left us all with hope that we would see and hear from him again. "Thanks for coming, friends," he said warmly. "I really appreciate it. I really appreciated your standing up when I came into the room. Hoping to do this again. I intend to stick around until 120."

He also admitted to a fondness for hummingbirds. "I have always loved those magical little creatures," he said, and recited a recently composed song about them, only words so far, no music.

*Listen to the hummingbird*
*Whose wings you cannot see*
*Listen to the hummingbird*
*Don't listen to me*
*Listen to the butterfly*
*Whose days but number three*
*Listen to the butterfly*
*Don't listen to me*

*Listen to the mind of God*
*Which doesn't need to be*
*Listen to the mind of God*
*Don't listen to me*

After the applause faded, he added, "I would say the hummingbird deserves royalties on that one." When asked if it would be on the next album, he said, softly, "God willing."

That a songwriter and singer would end a long and remarkable career with the statement, "Don't listen to me," says everything about the soul of Leonard Cohen. At the end he pointed us all away from this light shining on him to the light inside all things, the source of all songs. The place where the great songs come from.

It's where he is now.

Hallelujah. ★

ILLUSTRATION BY COURTNEY SPENCER

# LEONARD COHEN IN TRIBUTE

*Songwriters Reflect On The Icon's Legacy*

### AMANDA SHIRES

Leonard was a seeker, a searcher and a companion to all of us that have been long-time wanderers and long-time sufferers. His songs are the kind that will last forever; they're the kind that have been stitched to our world with elvish thread. He had a superhuman ability to translate the human condition into words and song. He explained our feelings to us and for us. He encouraged us to be compassionate and to open our eyes to each other. He went into the trenches of darkness, met loneliness, studied love, meditated and fought, sacrificing himself along the way. He made our flaws and scars feel earned and lovely. He coaxed us like hungry birds to the truths that he kept finding underneath his hat. I know that he will be forever unmatched, bringing grace to music and beauty to the parts of ourselves that we have known to be ugly.

Since his passing I have been thinking a lot about his Isle of Wight performance. That night in 1970 Leonard reminded us that we could renew ourselves at any moment that we choose to, in any place of our choosing. Because this past year has been a year of losing and loss, and because many of us are hurting under a tarnishing golden rule, let's try and go forward in service to the higher power and in service to one another. Let's remember that we can renew ourselves. Let's make an effort and let's not be lost.

### AARON LEE TASJAN

Dark, exhilarating and angelic, the music of Leonard Cohen now remains an everlasting sanctuary to all who would listen. Mr. Cohen left us November 7th having just released one of his most brilliant albums yet, titled, *You Want It Darker*, while declaring in a recent interview with *The New Yorker* he was "… ready to die." Despite his prophetic words, it seemed sudden when we lost one of the true American masters of song and poetry. He writes brilliant lines that say so much with such economy. In "Love Is A Fire," he says of love, "It's the world's excuse for being ugly." Cohen always writes with a frozen rope right through the heart of the song. You can hang anything off it and it still rings true. These songs are built to last and they won't ever fail you. In a world where it seems hard to know what to believe, it's of great comfort to have songs such as these to believe in.

### ROBERT ELLIS

His words and music have the ability to pull me out of wherever my head is at and bring me into the present, really noticing things, feeling everything deeply. When I've been down he has given me humor. When I've been in love he's given me a language for the things I feel but don't know how to say to someone. I'm deeply saddened that we won't have him here to help us make sense of the world but I'm forever grateful.

### HENRY WAGONS

I'm so glad Leonard Cohen was here. At once gentle and powerful. His poise and mesmerizing delivery unmatched. His wicked humor. I loved his songs, all the way through, every word weighted and balanced. I'm left forever hypnotized. Rest In Peace.

### RUBY BOOTS

I was singing my favorite Leonard Cohen song, "Chelsea Hotel #2," while soundchecking for a show when a friend delivered the news of his passing. His words have influenced my music and have helped and inspired me to break open parts of myself lyrically that perhaps would have remained untapped. Thank you, LC.

### JAMES WILSON
#### OF SONS OF BILL

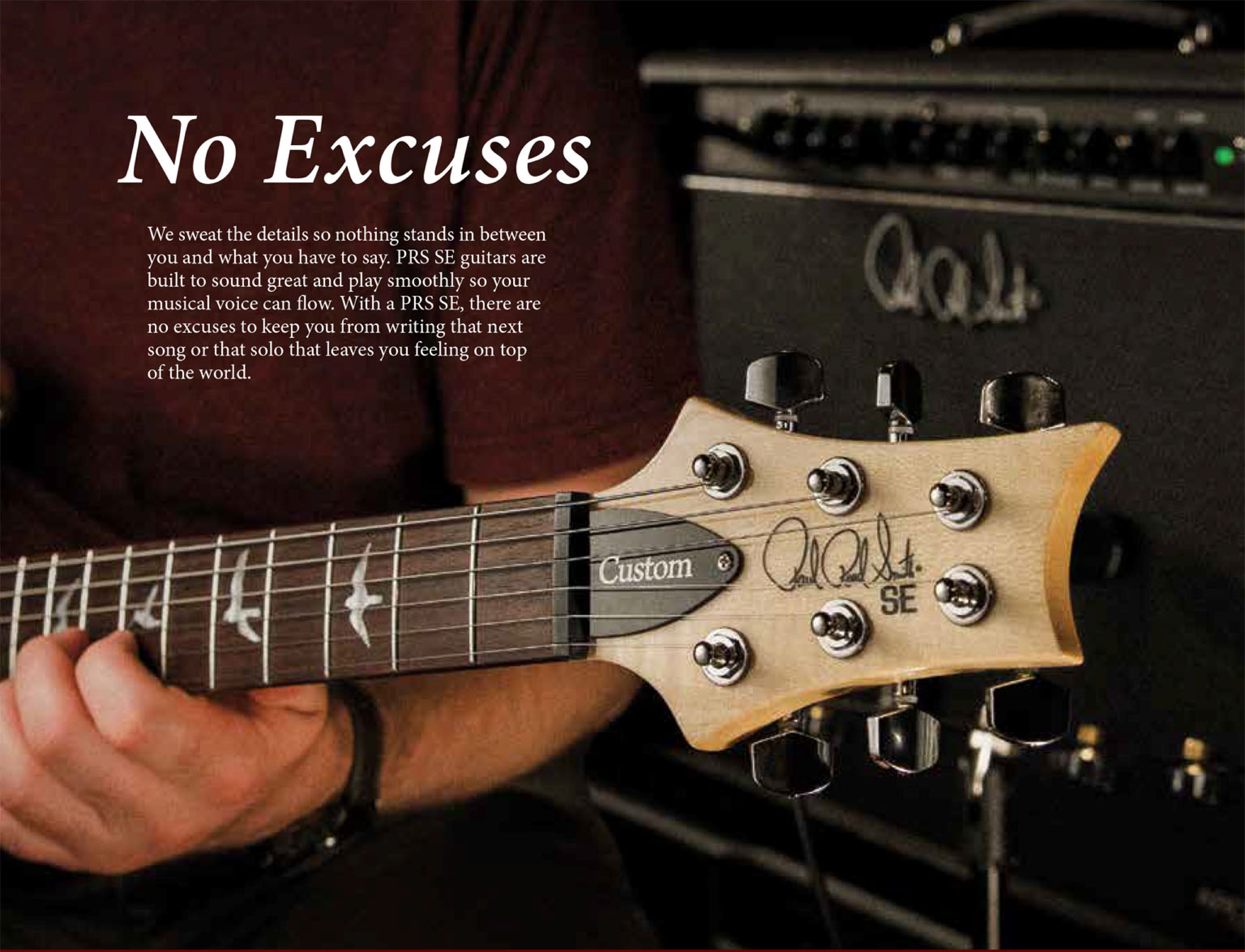
Leonard Cohen's songs are often described as timeless. While I wouldn't disagree, "timeless" here can't simply be another overused journalistic synonym for "good." With Cohen the word means something else. His songs have an abstracted quality that is almost pathological: Ageless. Placeless. They are like little hymns with no church, stories riddled with minute details and particularities that still somehow always manage to be more bewildering than grounding. I don't know anyone that loves them that wouldn't describe themselves as haunted by them.

It could be that Cohen's songs are timeless because they are essentially tragic, in the classical sense of the term. They give us a picture of man, little vignettes of Cohen himself, blindly stumbling like all of us between his fate and his responsibilities, his drive for freedom and his incontrovertible circumstance, haunted by an incessant dream of perfection in a world that always seems to come up short. For all of the poetic romanticization of a life spent "paying rent in the Tower of Song," does Cohen himself not clue his listener in to what this actually means? The basic and fundamental fear of simply being human? It's a question Cohen tirelessly drove at his entire career, and his life's work is a beautiful and tragic record of what it costs.

> "LEONARD REMINDED US THAT WE COULD RENEW OURSELVES AT ANY MOMENT THAT WE CHOOSE TO, IN ANY PLACE OF OUR CHOOSING."
>
> -AMANDA SHIRES

### MATTHEW RYAN

Almost exactly a year ago I sat on a park bench across from Leonard Cohen's modest Montreal home. It was very much an accident that I ended up there. It was October 2015. It was cool and evening had crept into all the corners of the neighborhood. People and cars glided by; I was soon to play a show just up the street. A friend knew of my love of Leonard's work, so they took me there. We sat quietly. I didn't take a picture — dignity insists you respond in kind. I grew up with Cohen's voice in my



*"Whether you are a student or a master, every one of these guitars pulls at your heart strings."*

- Carlos Santana

*"An incredibly special instrument."*

- Mark Holcomb of Periphery

*"Tremendous guitar right from the start."*

- Mark Tremonti of Alter Bridge/Tremonti

*"A player's guitar that can take a beating."*

- Zach Myers of Shinedown

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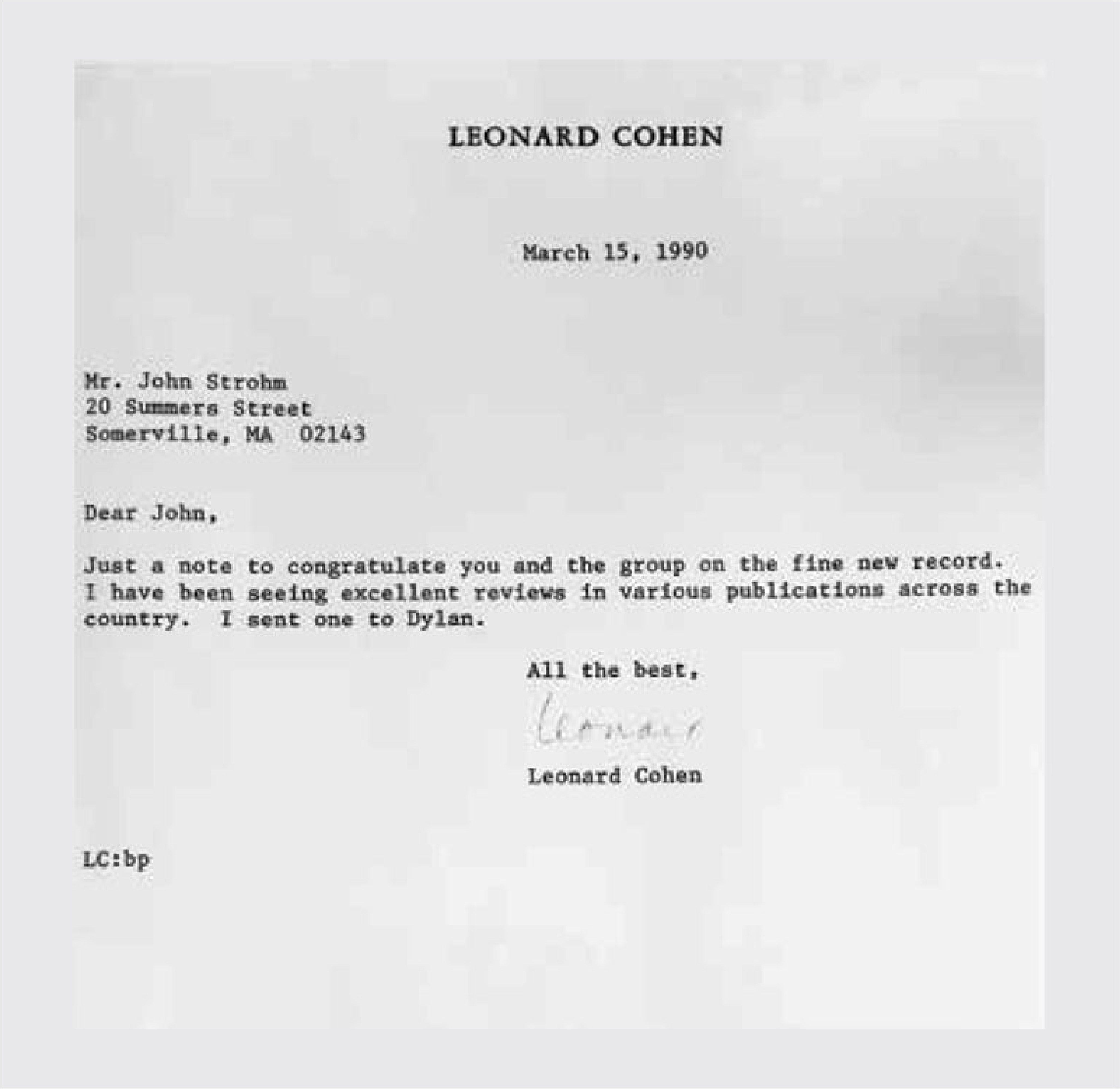
childhood house. He's been a great companion through every mile marker in my life so far. And in the harder parts, he taught me how to breathe in a bunker. He taught me that grace and poetry are the muscles that matter; they visit us after the battles, inside and out. I'm going to miss him.


LEONARD COHEN

March 15, 1990

Mr. John Strohm
20 Summers Street
Somerville, MA 02143

Dear John,

Just a note to congratulate you and the group on the fine new record. I have been seeing excellent reviews in various publications across the country. I sent one to Dylan.

All the best,

Leonard Cohen

LC:bp

But I'm so grateful to have shared a gap in time with him. What a privilege to have experienced so much of what he created while it was happening. The world he observed and communicated, both inside and out, feels like the world I've been trying to come to terms with ... fellow listeners of Leonard's are probably the only people that will fully understand what I mean by that. But believe me, you're all invited, you always were.

Maybe it's not fair to Leonard Cohen to draw this thread that I'm drawing. His work is beyond compare; his art is among the humblest of high art. He traveled through the dark to find light and became something that has become so rare. He became a kind of true statesman for the human heart. No goofiness, no salesmanship, no need beyond the need. Nothing but great melodies, a "golden voice," and immeasurable words — comfort, humor, sensuality and armor. And he shared them with those of us that welcomed it, needed it and thirsted for the illumination of the entirety of our humanity.

On the early morning of November 9th an idiot walked into the highest office of our land; on November 10th, we were told that a monument to dignity walked out. And if all I've learned from Cohen's work is true, there's a lesson here that simultaneously means everything and nothing. But know this, the future now will be what we allow it to be. And it's up to us to see the beauty that's always right there, right in front of us, invisible but absolutely exhilarating, alive and waiting.

Thank you, Leonard Cohen.

## KATE TUCKER

I'm honored, humbled, and afraid to write about Leonard Cohen. I struggle to find the right words, as he often did so patiently on our behalf, line by line, song by song. His work was an exercise in intention. Listening to it demands a certain silence, an admission of love, a commitment to life beyond Boogie Street. *You Want It Darker* came like a poultice for suffering, in a year that has been darker than any I can remember. Upon news of his death, my sister and I stopped the film we were watching, turned out the lights, lit candles and cried. We cried for Marianne, for King David, for the now defunct Chelsea Hotel, for Suzanne with her tea and oranges, and for our mother, who also died this year. We cried with our friend in the Tower of Song who teaches us how to live on.

## JOHN STROHM

**OF BLAKE BABIES, THE LEMONHEADS**

Sometimes the songs that haunt me the most are the ones I heard around the house as a young child. Although nobody else in my family plays music, we're all huge music fans – especially my English professor father. Before I could walk I spent a lot of time looking through his album collection as sounds of Dylan, Billie Holiday, The Stones, The Band, Joni Mitchell, and countless other greats serenaded from the walnut-cased Pioneer speakers. I loved some of it (The Beatles naturally), hated some (country blues and bluegrass), as most of it went unnoticed.

One album that really bothered me was *Songs Of Leonard Cohen*. The eerie photo on the cover (looking more or less like one of my dad's professorial colleagues), the bizarre Anima Sola image on the back cover … all just gave me the creeps. I felt both drawn to and repelled by the eerie strains and ghostly voices of Suzanne, which he played constantly. It seemed mysterious and unsettling.

In my late teenage years I rediscovered *Songs Of Leonard Cohen*, along with the rest of his catalogue. It still seemed eerie, but in a way that really drew me in. I listened to his records obsessively for years, learned to play all his songs, read his novels and books of poetry. Along with study of Lou Reed and Hank Williams, it's really how I taught myself to write songs. I still remember how to play and sing at least 20 of his songs, and that's half as many as I could play back in 1988.

I mention 1988 because that's the year he released his masterpiece, *I'm Your Man*, and also it's the year my dad started seeing a woman, a history professor, who had previously dated and remained friendly with Leonard. Occasionally Leonard would leave messages on my father's answering machine for his friend, and dad would save them for me to hear when I visited. He would make the most mundane things sound incredibly profound and poetic. That voice …

In 1990 my band, Blake Babies, released our first album on Mammoth Records, an independent label based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. We were all in our early 20s, and it was a very exciting time. After several years of struggle, suddenly we were touring the nation, getting lots of college radio airplay, and getting reviewed in *Rolling Stone*. One day a letter arrived in my mailbox from Leonard, congratulating me on our release. He sent one to Bob Dylan, he said. I can't explain how thrilling it was for me to receive this letter. I immediately had it framed and it's on my office wall today. I wrote him back, and I'm sure I'd be embarrassed to see what I said. I cherish the letter, and I think it really shows what a generous man he was. He knew how much I loved his music, and he knew how much it would mean to a kid like me. ★

## THE BAND/VARIOUS ARTISTS
### THE LAST WALTZ-40TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
(WARNER BROTHERS/ RHINO) ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

***THE LAST WALTZ*** was considered the finest rock and roll film ever produced when it was released in 1978 and, 38 years later, that somewhat immodest title holds true.

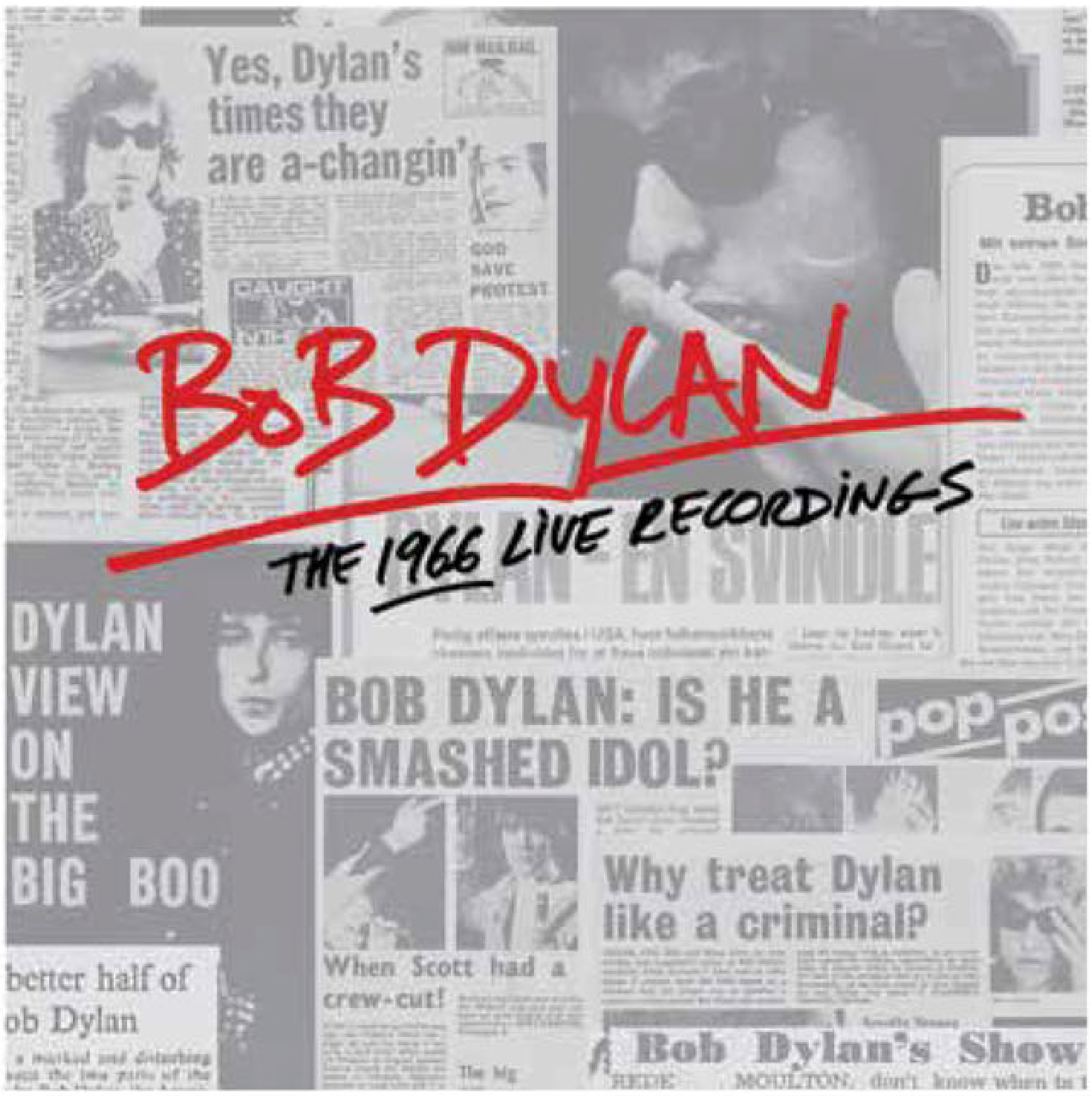
As we now know, this concert/celebration wasn't the end of The Band but rather the conclusion of its original incarnation. That doesn't diminish the enjoyment of the sumptuous musical presentation hearing (and watching) the act perform with their friends, frontmen and inspirations at arguably the height of their career, on Thanksgiving Day, 1976.

Other than changing the cover and reissuing the 4-CD 2002 expanded version — beautifully (if inaccurately sequenced) augmented with outtakes, rehearsals and jams — the compilers didn't do much else. Surely, the advanced technology of 2016 justifies remastering the sound, and someone should have considered presenting the event in chronological order, with The Band's set first, followed by the guests.

Instead we get the same songs now housed with a newly available Blu-ray of Martin Scorsese's wonderful movie, and some fresh booklet notes. There is also a 6-platter vinyl set, the double disc truncated CD and a mammoth, wallet-shrinking, limited to 2,500 copies "Collector's Edition" bound in red faux leather, including a 300-page book, rare photos, set sketches and a 5.1 audio mix.

Regardless, the music holds up with The Band in breathtaking, confident form and the guests (generally) pushing them into riveting and momentous performances. Dylan, Van Morrison, Muddy Waters, Ronnie Hawkins and Eric Clapton show the deepness and diversity of the quintet's blues, rock, soul and folk evolution.

The freshness, spontaneity, vitality and life-affirming aspects of the show haven't dissipated over the decades, even if all but two of the Band members have passed on, making *The Last Waltz* as essential and more historically resonant today than it was 40 years ago.
— HAL HOROWITZ




## BOB DYLAN
### THE 1966 LIVE RECORDINGS
(SONY LEGACY) ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**KNOWLEDGEABLE MUSIC FANS** need only look at the title of Bob Dylan's latest excavation of unreleased material to understand that it's five-star stuff. The *1966 Live Recordings* exhaustively document one of the most hallowed tours in rock history, as Dylan took the band that would become The Band overseas, thrilling most and angering some by charging up his newest compositions and some old warhorses with fierce electric energy. The audio evidence unearthed here should only enhance that reputation.

Dylan previously released the Manchester show from this tour (the one where the fan shouts "Judas" at him) way back on *Bootleg Series Volume 4*. Releasing 36 discs worth of performances allows for listeners to trace this remarkable musical journey step by incendiary step. (Alas, those shows in the States are audience tapes and are thus hampered by poor sound quality.)

The way the shows are mixed with the music front and center, it's sometimes hard to hear the infamous catcalls aimed at Dylan. You can, however, hear his withering responses, although it's not until the tail end of the tour that it turns into open warfare. Considering the way the final London show devolves into mutual provocation between artist and audience, it's understandable why Dylan retreated from that madness soon after.

While most people focus on the electric half of the shows, with Dylan howling above The Band's funky assault, you can make a case that the acoustic portions of these concerts hold just as much value. Dylan goes through an eight-song set of staggering quality ("Desolation Row," "Just Like A Woman," "Visions Of Johanna," and so on) with his interpretive skills at their peak and his hold over his audiences nothing short of mesmeric. Maybe only Dylan completists will shell out for a series of discs with repetitive set lists, but they will be getting a bargain.
— JIM BEVIGLIA

## ROBERT RANDOLPH
### GOT SOUL
(SONY MUSIC MASTERWORKS) ★ ★ ★ ★

**IT'S LIKELY THAT** anyone first hearing Robert Randolph's music would have no clue he was playing pedal steel guitar. Yet, since the frontman's early days honing his sacred steel chops in church, Randolph has taken the once-reticent country supporting instrument and dragged it kicking and screaming to center stage. He replaced the sweet, tranquil sound with a hyper-caffeinated, dentist-drill attack, transforming it into a buzzing, overdriven, wonky slide guitar as comfortable with secular soul and funk as Southern blues rocking and even modified metal.

Randolph has likewise moved past traditional gospel, preferring to preach his musical sermons of togetherness to crossover audiences more attuned to Eric Clapton, Derek Trucks and ZZ Top, all of whom he has played with.

Studio album number five follows a three-year break for Randolph and his Family Band, but doesn't reveal a substantial direction change. Subtlety is not Randolph's strong suit. Rather he hammers licks with muscular support from his longtime group, bringing religious fervor to rock and roll, made especially potent with churchy backing vocals. That's seldom clearer than in Randolph's take on Sam & Dave's "I Thank You" which pounds through four electrifying minutes. On "Travelin' Cheeba Man," the amped-up instrumental finds the middle ground between Deep Purple and a runaway freight train in a breathless three-and-a-half-minutes guaranteed to scare the devil away from any gathering. It's not a stretch to hear AC/DC's monster "Back In Black" riff in Randolph's "I Want It."

Lyrics that lean toward the pedantic evidenced by song titles "It's Going To Be Alright," "Shake It Off," and "Find A Way" are less uplifting than clichéd. But they remain secondary to the pure joy and raw passion in these dozen performances that will make even those who have never entered a house of worship become believers in the healing power of raw rock and soul. — HAL HOROWITZ

## TIFT MERRITT
### STITCH OF THE WORLD
(YEP ROC) ★ ★ ★ ★

**VERY FEW ARTISTS** can run the gamut between Dusty Springfield and Joni Mitchell as effortlessly as Tift Merritt. Those skills are on excellent display in *Stitch Of The World*, her latest album. It's a very simple formula for success: put Merritt in front of a crack band, keep the production subtle, and let her do her thing. Of course, that formula only works to this extent when you have a songwriter and performer with such copious talents.

*Stitch Of The World* begins with Merritt at her feistiest, as she settles in behind a Buddy Holly rockabilly stomp for "Dusty Old Man," an ode to grizzled experience. With the exception of that song and "Proclamation Bones," she mostly stays on the softer, more contemplative side of the musical spectrum. But even at that slower pace, the title track, with its New Age vibe, represents the only instance where one of these songs seems to meander.

Merritt is at her best with some of the more soulful numbers. On "Heartache Is An Uphill Climb," she soars through the chorus, her vocals in the upper register taking on a little Dolly Parton quaver that demonstrates just how true that song title is. On "Love Soldiers On," that most cherished of emotions turns out to be quite resilient, especially with Merritt voicing its adventures.

On the final three songs of the disc, she gets vocal assistance from Sam Beam of Iron & Wine fame. Beam's hushed, haunted stylings provide a nice counterpoint, embellishing both the mystery of "Eastern Light" and the uplift of "Something Came Over Me." On the latter track, Merritt sings, "I forgot my heart had room like that/ Open spaces behind the cracks." *Stitch Of The World* contains a few songs that detail how those cracks were made and a few more that show them in the process of healing. The unifying factor is Tift Merritt, and that's enough to make this one a keeper.
— JIM BEVIGLIA

## VALERIE JUNE
### THE ORDER OF TIME
(CONCORD RECORDS) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

**VALERIE JUNE** has been making her distinct blend of plaintive folk traditionals, Southern soul, and country blues for more than a decade, but it wasn't until her 2013 breakthrough *Pushin' Against A Stone* that she established herself as one of the most promising roots synthesizers of her generation.

On her latest album, *The Order Of Time*, June continues to progress and advance as a songwriter, vocalist and arranger. This time, the singer's Memphis influences have never been more pronounced; indeed, the running highlight of June's latest effort is her complete mastery of the mid-tempo soul ballad. On songs like "Slip Slide On By," "Love You Once Made," and the feel-good closing rave "Got Soul," June sets her slow-building R&B to swelling horn sections that recall peak-era James Carr and O.V. Wright. Unlike many of her Americana peers, June never needs to call attention to her own vocal theatrics nor rely on tent-revival affectation when channeling mid- to late-'60s R&B, instead grounding her material in the flexibility and dynamics of her stunning, quivering warble.

Just as impressive, then, is June's equal command of mood and atmosphere. Spectral organ and densely layered acoustic guitars guide songs like "The Front Door," "Two Hearts" and "Astral Plane." These ethereal, contemplative and meandering narratives provide a counterbalance to the controlled catharsis of June's soul.

Her songwriting has also never been sharper. "Long Lonely Road' is a powerful blues lament of personal history, while "Two Hearts" depicts fresh love with moving clarity: "Though I'd settled in my ways," she sings, "it's mighty fine waking to your face."

More ornate and richly produced than any of her previous recordings, *The Order Of Time* fully establishes June as a proper auteur who has long transcended any limitations as a quaint revivalist.

— JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

## R.E.M.
### OUT OF TIME (REISSUE)
(CONCORD BICYCLE) ★ ★ ★ ★

**OUT OF TIME?** Just in time.

Since R.E.M.'s *Out Of Time* was released in March of 1991, this 25th anniversary reissue, arriving mid-November 2016, sneaks in under the wire. It would have been criminal to miss this landmark because the group's seventh full-length thrust them into the commercial big leagues and remains a catalog highlight.

Credit "Losing My Religion," the unlikely, mandolin-led, #4 charting single promoted by an artsy video heavily played on MTV. That combination propelled the album to the top of the charts in the U.S. and U.K. (and five other countries), sold 12 million copies and ultimately grabbed three Grammys; all despite it being R.E.M.'s first release they did not tour behind, an anomaly for a band that had spent the majority of the past decade on the road.

While *Out Of Time* isn't entirely acoustic, it's more placid than much of R.E.M.'s edgier earlier fare. There's less "It's The End Of The World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)" frazzled energy and a greater emphasis on mood as on the brooding "Country Feedback." Conversely, there's an underlying playfulness, too, particularly in the Turtles-like backing vocals of "Near Wild Heaven" and the pop-fizz of "Shiny Happy People," the latter bolstered by guest Kate Pierson from Athens peers the B-52's.

An extra disc of 19 newly remixed demos is more than window dressing. Stripped from the production flourishes, these early raw versions of every OOT track show the songs taking shape with hummed sections where words hadn't been written, different lyrics and sometimes no lyrics at all. Not just for fans, these bring us closer to the creation of the tunes, generating a terrific alternative version of one of R.E.M.'s finest collections.

— HAL HOROWITZ

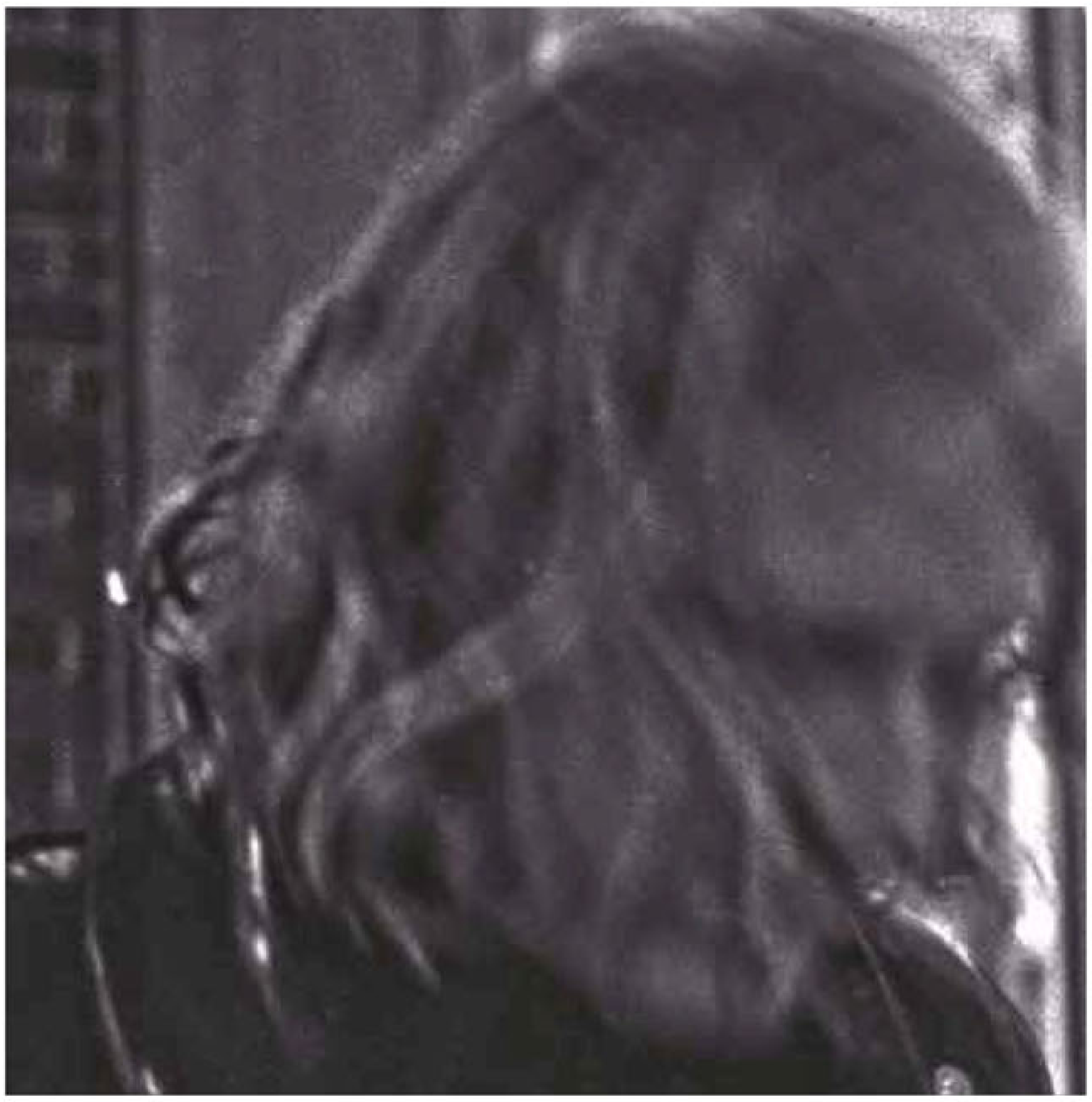
## FLAMING LIPS
### OCZY MLODY
(WARNER BROS.) ★ ★ ★ ★

**THE FLAMING LIPS** haven't been in the best place for a few years. Wayne Coyne's separation from his longtime partner ended up yielding the morose *The Terror*, which wasn't a bad album but definitely lacked the immediacy of past triumphs. What followed was a period of questionably executed covers of entire albums, intra-band fights and problematic arguments in favor of white people wearing Native American fashion accessories. (Ugh.)

That puts a lot of pressure on *Oczy Mlody*, the band's 14th album. No doubt, whatever the Lips were going to do was bound to be at the very least interesting. *Oczy Mlody* was never in danger of being boring or inconsequential. That it's actually very good makes it feel like a moment of redemption for a band that seemingly had trouble finding their way out of the wilderness.

The album is heavy on psychedelic effects and atmosphere. It's mostly free of the overbearing darkness and abrasion of their past two albums, and instead is awash in blissfully dreamy synths and ambiance. First single "The Castle" is a small sliver of the album's overall approach, a gently hallucinatory pop song with programmed beats and LSD-induced imagery. Yet *Oczy Mlody*, despite a drop in noise and gnarl, is as maximalist as the Lips have ever sounded. The krautrock pulse of "There Should Be Unicorns" is a moment of badass triumph, a driving and powerful moment that's simultaneously focused and constantly expanding.

Curiously absent from *Oczy Mlody* are Steven Drozd's booming drums. As such, the dynamic is dramatically different here, and while that's a major component of the band's sound to go missing, it represents one thing that the Lips have always been good at: taking risks. *Oczy Mlody* isn't a repeat of past glories or crowd-pleasing familiarity. It finds the Flaming Lips re-focused, inspired and prepared to bend minds again, as only they can do. — JEFF TERICH



## TY SEGALL
### TY SEGALL
(DRAG CITY) ★ ★ ★ ★

**OF ALL THE IMPRESSIVE** talents that Ty Segall has revealed throughout his career, no one quality stands out so much as his penchant for prolificacy. His self-titled album will be his ninth album since 2010's breakthrough *Melted*, and across that span of albums he's covered a wide spectrum: psychedelic folk on *Sleeper*, glam rock on *Twins* and thunderous stoner rock on *Slaughterhouse*, to touch upon just some of the territory he's conquered in a relatively short time.

By leaving his 11th album self-titled — making it the second self-titled record of his — Segall would seem to suggest that it's a culmination of his work to date, that of all the Segall albums released thus far, this is the Segall-iest. There's a kernel of truth to that idea, actually, and while this album finds Segall covering a wide stylistic spread, there's no moment here that doesn't feel quintessentially Ty.

*Ty Segall* feels, at times, like a greatest hits collection that just happens to comprise entirely new songs. Every song, even those in which Segall dials back the distortion or strums an acoustic, hits with maximum impact and arrives with an immediacy that often evades the deepest cuts. It starts off strong, the blazing riffs of "Break A Guitar" creating a speaker-blowing backdrop for Segall's cheeky lyrical posturing: "Oh baby, take a guitar/ I want you to be a big star." "The Only One" explodes with the rollicking fuzz and Ozzy-like delivery of vintage Black Sabbath, and "Talkin'" proves that Segall can pull off breezy country rock just as adeptly as he can do garage rave-ups.

As much as *Ty Segall* is an album of potential singles material, it's one of the most cohesive sets of music that Segall has released to date. On second thought, maybe his greatest strength isn't his volume of output, but rather that he never stops growing as an artist.
— JEFF TERICH

# LYRIC CONTEST

## 1ST PLACE

### "Language Of The Broken-Hearted"
**Mike Guiney**
**Gananoque, Ontario, Canada**

Cardboard covers his broken window pane
But it's to block the sun and not the rain
Lost contact with everyone
Since the whole world went insane
Hard to say when he started sinking
But he'll finish what he began
rarely speaks, but when he does
the broken-hearted understand
rarely speaks, but when he does
the broken-hearted understand

Always talks of where he's been
And never where he's goin'
Quotes Hank Williams Sr.
And sometimes Leonard Cohen
Speaks of old lovers
Like they're in the promised land
Using the kind of words
the broken-hearted understand
Using the kind of words
The broken-hearted understand

He says the high stakers and chaos makers
make the rules and say who wins
the nine to fivers, the street survivors
are on the outside, looking in
And don't try to tell him otherwise
He'll just hold up his hand
His native tongue it is one
the broken-hearted understand
His native tongue it is one
the broken-hearted understand

## 2ND PLACE

### "We Want"
**Hope Dunbar**
**Utica, Nebraska**

The lake wants to be the sea, the sea wants to be the land.
The land wants to be the sky
and have the stars and her command.

The clouds want to be snow, snow wants to be rain,
rain just wants to run in the river some day.
And we want what we are not.
We want. And it won't stop.

The hush wants to be a hum, the hum wants to be a scream.
The scream wants to let out the hurt it holds down deep.
And the lion wants to be a lark, the lark wants to be a ghost,
the ghost only wants flesh to cover up his naked soul.
And we want what we are not. We want and it won't stop.

Silver wants to be gold, gold wants to be a gem,
the gem wants to shine forever in a diadem.
And I want to be a pearl, I want to be a gift.
I want to be a song you sing like this.
And I want what I am not. I want and it won't stop.
And we want what we are not. We want and it won't stop.

Visit
americansongwriter.com/contests
TO ENTER THE MARCH/APRIL 2017 CONTEST

# JANUARY FEBRUARY WINNERS

## 3RD PLACE

### "Life Beneath The Rust"
**Mike Ryan**
**Clifton, Virginia**

Wide awake at 3:00 am
Alone with all of my regrets
The old front gate rattles in the wind
And memories burn in the dark like cigarettes

These days I wake in the morning shaking
Scared of something I can't put my finger on
And when I retrace the steps my life has taken
I wonder if the best has come and gone

(Chorus)
Though my heart is frayed around the corners
And my soul is covered up with dust
I know there's cracks in the brick and mortar
But there's still life beneath the rust

I used to think the answer lied in wandering
That the road it had secrets to reveal
But after all the miles
and all my late night pondering
I still feel just the way I used to feel

And despite my scars and the wages of my sins
For the life of me I cannot explain
Why I make the same mistakes
time and time again
And why I never learn my lesson
from the pain (Chorus)

And the engine on that old Ford
it ain't turned since '69
It just sits out in the pasture
covered up with kudzu vines
Reminding me time's a river
that flows steady everyday
And bit by bit the water's gentle touch
Wears the canyon's walls away (Chorus)

## 4TH PLACE

### "Notable Ghosts"
**Andrew Bean**
**Indianapolis, Indiana**

Daddy he worked as a lawyer
He fucked up his way through the '90s
He took all he could from his family
And gave to the dealers
And all the hateful dream stealers he knew

He still calls to say "happy birthday"
Or just to make sure that I voted
Between civic duty and sorry
Sorry was just too hard a word to say
But I think I'll be okay

You're just a notable ghost
Someone that I used to know
Flying by night from the shores of my mind
I'm all out of love
I'm all out of time
You're just a notable ghost

I knew a girl from a village
In the sewers of North Indiana
A smile that could tear you to pieces
If she could take you
She'd break you like I-65

She still calls every now and then
Presumably far from her boyfriend
With musings of love in the abstract
You know a poetic drunk
Just sounds like a drunk to me
At least now I can sleep

She's just a notable ghost
And I'm better off drinking alone
I'll be just fine with my whiskey and wine
I'm all out of love
I'm all out of time
She's just a notable ghost

Here's to the notable ghosts
Damned to a lifetime alone
Blessed are they who can lock them away
And keep on living their lives just the same
Not scared of notable ghosts

Cursed be my eyes if I see you tonight
I'm all out of love
I'm all out of time
You're just notable ghosts

## HONORABLE MENTION

**"What Do I Ask Of Love"**
**Terrence Durant**
**Seattle, Washington**

**"Strangers"**
**Alice Doskocil**
**Crosby, Texas**

**"Don't Forget To Forgive Me"**
**Jane Fallon**
**Brookline, New Hampshire**

**"Broken Heartland"**
**Bill McGinnis**
**Park City, Utah**

**"Small Town Girls"**
**Jessica Fox**
**Bakersfield, California**

**"Whiskey Breath"**
**Jamie Parsons Lesche**
**Malibu, California**

**"Superman"**
**Ron Hollomon**
**McKinney, Texas**

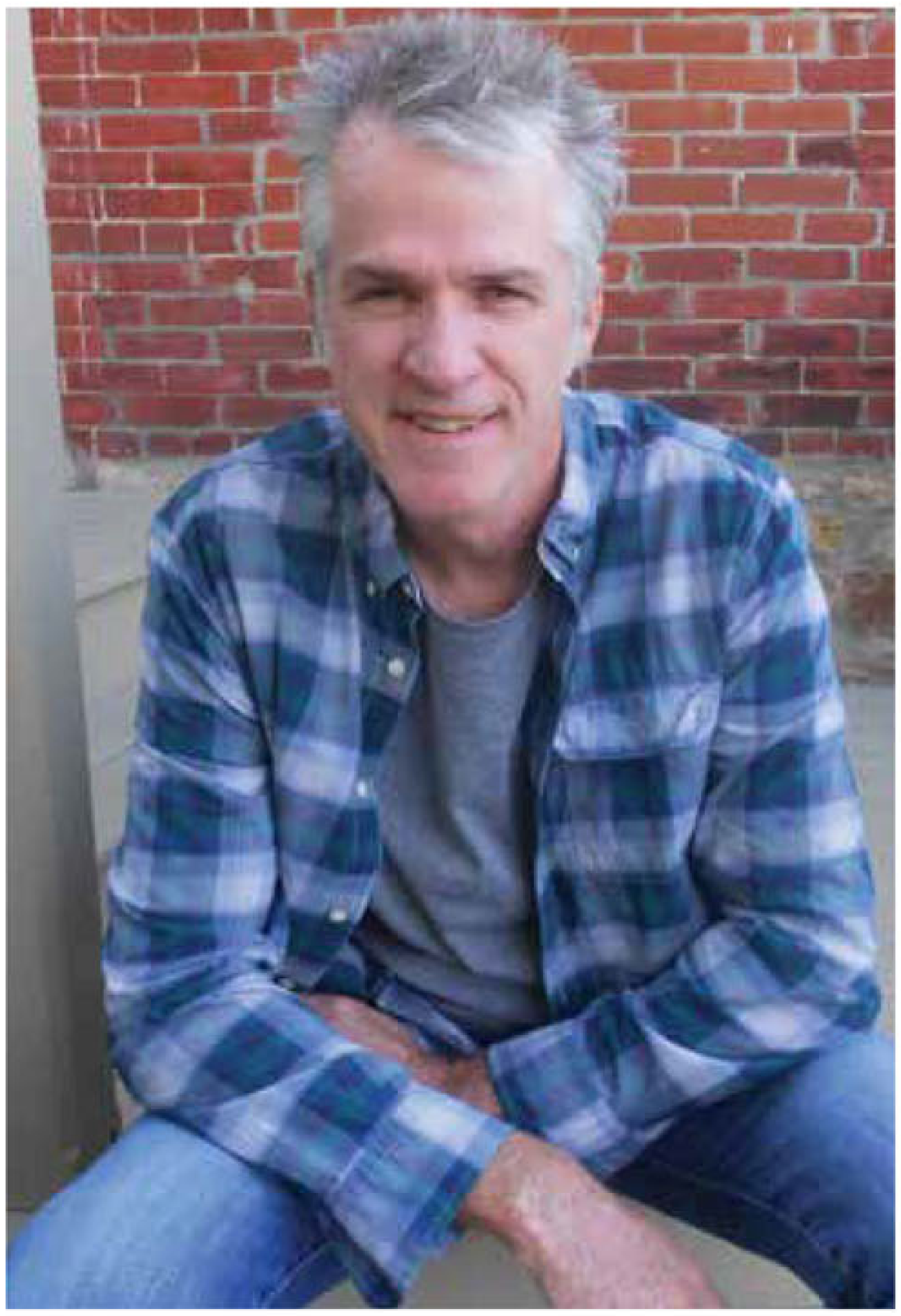
**"Mind To Travel"**
**Jackson Lucas**
**Washington, D.C.**

**"You Do You, I'll Do Me"**
**John Bungard**
**Antioch, Tennessee**

**"Daisy"**
**Rob Redwine**
**Fort Worth, Texas**

# AMERICAN SONGWRITER LYRIC CONTEST Q&A

## 1ST PLACE



## "Language Of The Broken-Hearted"

### Written by Mike Guiney

#### Interview by Brittney McKenna

**What inspired you to write this particular song?**
This song started with the title. I think I was listening to Joan Osborne's cover of the classic Motown song "What Becomes Of The Broken-hearted" when the phrase "language of the broken-hearted" sort of popped into my head and I thought I might have something.

**When did you write it? How long did it take to write, start-to-finish?**
The original version of the song was probably written over year ago. It was slightly different, with each verse ending with the title. But I was not happy with the phrasing. So I switched some lines around and came up with this version, which is only a month or two old.

**Have you written a melody or any music for this song?**
I have come up with a basic C-F-C-G sequence. But, I need someone to come up with a nice hook or bridge to take it to the next level. Something to give it the punch it needs.

**Is there a line in this song that you are particularly proud of?**
I am partial to the opening two lines. Maybe because I have had them kicking around for a while. I actually lifted them from another piece I wrote called "Built On The Blues."

**Is this song based on a personal experience of any kind, or did you inhabit the headspace of an imagined character?**
It is not based on any personal experience, but grew from the single title phrase. To me song lyrics are like the shortest of short stories. And they can be works of fiction or non-fiction. Writers of non-fiction will always be accountable to the truth. Fiction writers are not bound by that reality, which is why I like writing from that perspective. The hard part is making the work believable and relatable. Inhabiting the head-space of an imaginary character pretty well nails it.

**This song references Leonard Cohen, whom we lost in late 2016. How did his death affect you?**
When I hear of an artist's passing I always eulogize them by listening to their music. When Leonard Cohen died, my wife (whose name happens to be Suzanne) and I listened to the 1995 tribute album, *Tower Of Song*. When you listen to the lyrics it is easy to see why, since the late '60s, so many people have covered his songs. And they will be covered for years to come. But his passing, though sad, was also a cause for celebration. Only because he lived such a full life. One that really did seem to be filled with wine, women and song. And, much like Dylan, all that he achieved he did so on his own terms. How many other ordained Buddhist monks are in the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame?

**Do you have a songwriting process that you typically follow? Or does each song come to you in a different way?**
I do not have a process as such. When I was young I would not write a song down until it was basically fully-formed. Sometimes I would carry it in my head for days. Now I need to write the ideas down pretty well right away, or I will forget them. The other aspect that has changed for me is the editing stage. I now know it is a crucial part of the process. The fine tuning is important.

**You were our first place Lyric Contest winner in 2015. How does it feel to be recognized again a year later?**
Surprising, rewarding and humbling. I have been reading *American Songwriter* for a long time. So it is great to see my work within its pages. I was glad to hear that being the 2015 Grand Prize winner did not preclude me from entering again. It is a great platform for lyricists. ★

## MEET OUR 2017 JUDGES

**SEYMOUR STEIN** (Chairman, SIRE Records; VP, Warner Brothers Records)
**NEIL MASON** (Songwriter, Recording Artist; The Cadillac Three)
**RANDY ROGERS** (Recording Artist/Songwriter; Randy Rogers Band)
**SEAN McCONNELL** (Recording Artist/Songwriter)
**MICHAEL FORD JR. & BEN FORD** (Recording Artists/Songwriters; Airpark)
**ANDREW COMBS** (Singer/Songwriter)
**LEE KRABEL** (Senior Creative Director, SMACKSongs)
**BRENT COBB** (Singer/Songwriter)
**JOHN STROHM** (Entertainment Attorney, Loeb & Loeb)
**HANNAH SHOWMAKER WILSON** (Creative Director, Big Loud Shirt)
**RACHAEL YAMAGATA** (Recording Artist/Songwriter)
**JACK INGRAM** (Recording Artist/Songwriter)
**LYDIA SCHULTZ** (Manager, Creative Services, SESAC)
**ELLIS PAUL** (Recording Artist/Songwriter)
**CAINE O'REAR** (Editor-In-Chief, American Songwriter magazine)

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**HONORABLE MENTIONS:** Ten honorable mentions are recognized in each issue.

By entering the Lyric Contest, non-subscribers will receive an issue of *American Songwriter*. (Offer applies to domestic entrants only.)

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## JOHN PAUL WHITE

John Paul White is a Grammy-winning singer-songwriter based in Florence, Alabama. He was one half of the acclaimed duo the Civil Wars, and released his second solo album, *Beulah*, in 2016. He is a co-owner, along with Ben Tanner of the Alabama Shakes, of Florence's Single Lock Records.

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Guitar varies for each contest. (For official rules and deadlines, please visit: www.americansongwriter.com/lyric-contest/lyric-rules-and-deadlines. Dates are subject to change.) The contest is open to any amateur songwriter. American Songwriter defines an amateur as one who has not earned more than $5,000 from songwriting related royalties, advances, or works for hire. The American Songwriter staff judges the first round and the second round is judged by a panel of music industry professionals, including executives from record companies, publishing companies, and PROs. The Top 4 winners and 10 Honorable Mentions are determined by a point system based on the judges' selections. The judges do not see the names of the entrants. **We are no longer accepting mail-in entries.**

# "How I Got My Music Licensed 1,205 Times"

*Barry French – TAXI Member – BigBlueBarry.com*

I took some time off from music, then my grandfather passed away and I re-evaluated what I was doing with my life. I felt the "call" of music, so I started writing again, decided to get serious about my music career, and joined TAXI in 2008.

**Honestly, I Was Skeptical at First…**

I did some research. I lurked on TAXI's Forums, and found that TAXI's successful members were real people just like me. Though I'd co-written with an Indie artist, and charted at #15 on the Radio & Records Christian Rock charts, I was clueless how to even *get* a film or TV placement— a complete newbie!

But TAXI's Industry Listings gave me goals to shoot for and helped me stay on task. I became more productive and *motivated* to get things done because I didn't want to feel like I "missed out" on an opportunity.

**How to Build The Right Catalog**

If you want to create music for art's sake, then by all means, go ahead and do that. But, if you want to have a music *career*, why not use TAXI to learn how build the *right* catalog full of music the industry actually *needs*?

**Expand Your Possibilities…**

TAXI can help you learn to write for genres you never thought you could do. I used to do mostly Hard Rock and Metal. Because of TAXI, I branched out into other genres— first Pop/Punk, and then Tension and "Dramedy" cues. I used the feedback from TAXI's A&R staff to improve my work. In many cases, my tracks improved to the point that they got signed *and* ultimately *placed* in TV shows!

**350 Placements in the Last Year!**

The first placement I ever had resulted from meeting a Music Library owner at the Road Rally— TAXI's free convention. In a little more than 3 years, my music has been licensed more than 1000 times, with nearly 350 placements in the past year *alone*!

**A "Lucky Duck?"**

My 1,000th placement was a Southern Rock track on A&E's hit show, *Duck Dynasty*. A TAXI connection resulted in me becoming a "go to" composer for a company that provides music directly to that series. How cool is that?!

TAXI's Listings, community, convention, and networking opportunities have helped my career *immensely*. The ONLY regret I have about joining TAXI is that I didn't sign up sooner! If you're willing to invest in yourself, call TAXI and let them help you too.

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By Rick Moore

From left to right: Michael Arlen Bont (banjo, vox), Paul Hoffman (mandolin, lead vox) Mike Devol (acoustic bass, vox) Dave Bruzza (guitar, lead vox) Anders Beck (dobro, lap steel)

Photo by Dylan Langille/OntheDL

# GREENSKY BLUEGRASS

## BUCKS INSTRUMENT TRADITIONS

In the early days of bluegrass music, two companies were largely responsible for creating that sound – Martin, for its guitars, and Gibson, for its mandolins and banjos. Even today, bluegrass patriarch Del McCoury plays a Martin D-28, mandolin legend Sam Bush depends on his trusty Gibson F5 named "Hoss," and banjo monster Bèla Fleck is still jamming on his prewar Gibson.

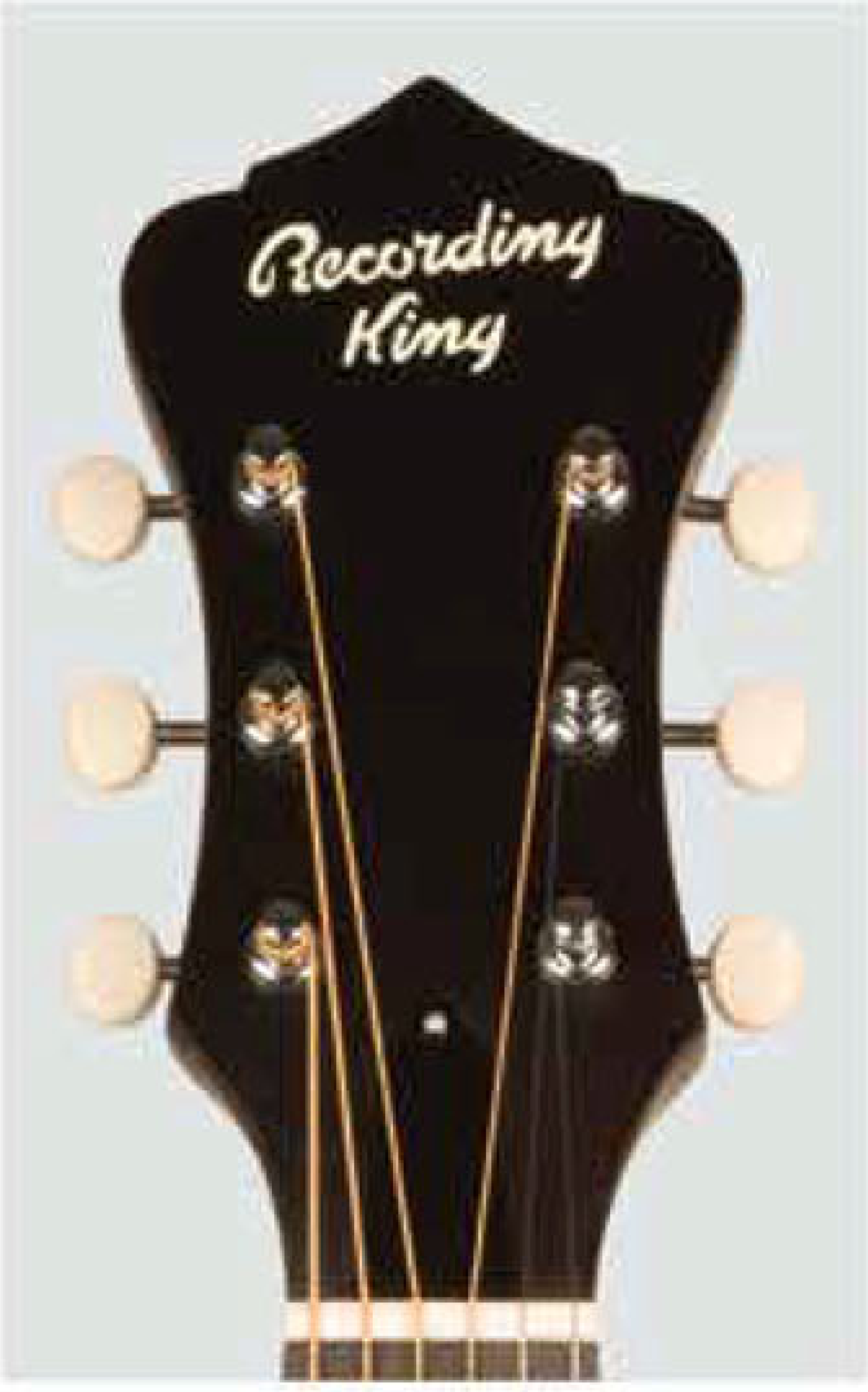
Things change, though, and new generations of players bring fresh sounds and different equipment preferences. That's the case with progressive bluegrass band Greensky Bluegrass, a band that can perhaps more accurately be called an acoustic rock band that uses bluegrass instruments. While the group features mostly the same instrumentation that Bill Monroe changed the music world with, the players use instruments that are more appropriate to their own sound and who they are as individuals. For instance, upright bassist/vocalist Mike Devol uses a modern Eminence bass, known for its unique smaller body size and shape. And the other four members of the band also play instruments that are definitely 21st-century axes.

Guitarist/vocalist Dave Bruzza plays a Santa Cruz VS (Vintage Southerner) model, but it's not totally stock, as Bruzza uses a Hipshot drop tuner on the low E-string. "I just like the way the guitar sounds," he says. "I've played many D-28s and I use a lot of guitars for recording, but the VS is used the most. I own a lot of guitars, and the one I used for the majority of our *If Sorrows Swim* album is a 1990 Brazilian sides and back Santa Cruz Tony Rice model. It's really the definition of a bluegrass guitar to me."

Mandolin player/singer Paul Hoffman plays a mandolin made by Paul Newson, a luthier in the band's home state of Michigan. "My mandolin is a 'Loar spec copy' in that the sizing, style, etc. are copies to his original Gibson specs," Hoffman says. "Newson made this mandolin to my paradoxical vague but specific ideas, what I liked, thought I needed and sounds I preferred. I started playing it in 2007, and it's the only mandolin I've played on stage since. It's very much 'mine' and unique to my tone."

Banjo player/vocalist Michael Arlen Bont uses an instrument made by Rock Bartley, another Michigan builder. "Rock is a master woodworker and a great banjo player who has set up and built some amazing banjos," Bont says. "My particular banjo was built from a piece of 120-plus-years-old mahogany he found when he was doing a remodel of a Victorian-era house. He sent some of it to Jim Cox to spin the resonator as well as a three-ply vintage style maple rim. The top-tension parts are vintage Gibson. A rare Jim Burlyle tone ring, hand-engraved and gold plated, makes it sound bell-like and even-sounding across the fretboard. The neck is built from the same piece of mahogany. This banjo sounds better than some of the best vintage banjos out there. I also have a Robinson banjo that Jake Robinson built in 2007. I designed it and did the inlay work. I also still have my first pro-style banjo, a 2001 Deering Deluxe."

Dobro man Anders Beck plays a square neck Paul Beard instrument, also with a Hipshot, as opposed to a vintage Dobro. "In my opinion, the modern builders like Paul Beard and Tim Scheerhorn have created instruments that are much more sonically advanced than original Dobros," he says. "They're louder, sharper, more dynamic and often have a set of overtones that make it feel more like playing a piano than a guitar. I mostly play in standard Dobro tuning (GBDGBD), and I use the Hipshot a few times a show to change the entire tuning of the guitar to a DADF#AD. It's a really amazing gadget, some strings stay the same while others drop at different intervals. All this happens just by moving what looks like a whammy bar. When [Dobro ace] Jerry Douglas was telling me about it, I told him that I still wouldn't believe that it works and stays in tune until I see it for myself. Of course, he was right. I also own a Scheerhorn square neck resonator guitar that I played exclusively until Jerry was nice enough to give me the Beard guitar as a gift. Both instruments are killer, but the Beard is my current favorite to take on the road." ★

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BY DAVID ALZOFON

# MEASURE FOR MEASURE

## *Steal This Song*

As the old saying goes, "A good composer does not imitate; he steals."

But don't expect that argument to hold up when you wind up in copyright court. Incidentally, copyright law varies, so investigate. As a rule, compositions dated 1922 or later and all sound recordings to the year 2067 are covered (see Circular 15A, U.S. Copyright Office).

The line between imitation and theft is a fine one, but there is one safe way to steal some great song material: raid the repertoires of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, and company. Pop song composers do it all the time. Just for fun, take the following quiz (answers at the end of the column):

**Match these classics:** 1) "Jesu Joy Of Man's Desiring," J.S. Bach 2) "Gymnopedie No. 1," Erik Satie 3) "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Variation 18," Sergei Rachmaninov 4) "Plaisir d'Amour," Paul Martini 5) "Canon in D," Johann Pachelbel 6) "Minuet in G," J.S. Bach (or Christian Petzold) 7) *Cantata 156*, "Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe," J.S. Bach 8), *Piano Sonata No. 8*, Pathétique, L.V. Beethoven 9) *Symphony No. 5* (horn motif), Jean Sibelius 10) "Moonlight Sonata," L.V. Beethoven

**With these pop songs:** A) "A Whiter Shade of Pale," Procol Harum B) "If I Had You," The Korgis C) "Because," The Beatles D) "A Lover's Concerto," The Toys E) "This Night," Billy Joel F) "Since Yesterday," Strawberry Switchblade G) "All Together Now," The Farm H) "Someone To Call My Lover," Janet Jackson I) "Lady Lynda," The Beach Boys J) "Can't Help Falling In Love," Elvis Presley

**Challenge yourself:** After you answer the quiz questions, dig deeper: Figure out how the arranger effected the classical-to-pop transformation in each song.

Paul Simon has been one of America's most intelligent, prolific, and melodically inventive songwriters for more than 50 years now and "American Tune" is often acknowledged as one of his best songs. Written in 1973, when Vietnam, Kent State, and the JFK, RFK, and MLK assassinations weighed heavily on everyone's minds, "American Tune" asserts its timeless quality once again in the wake of the acrimonious 2016 presidential campaign.

But Simon must have had his tongue at least partly in cheek when he penned the title, because "American Tune" is based on a German import, the chorale to J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion, "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" (1727). The plot thickens when you hear that Bach borrowed the melody from a hymn arranged by Johann Crüge in 1656, and Crüge lifted *his* melody from a love song, "Mein G'müth ist mir verwirret," by Hans Leo Hassler in 1600. Hassler, in turn, may have ripped off a Bavarian folk song. But the chain of theft doesn't end there. The melody crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower and was eventually picked up by the labor movement. Its last stop before "American Tune" was likely "The Whole Wide World Around," with lyrics by Tom Glazer. Peter, Paul and Mary performed the song in a 1965 BBC broadcast. When they recorded it, the title became Biblical: "Because All Men Are Brothers" (*Psalm 133:1*).

**It is interesting to note that, in a sense, melody is destiny.**

Bach's melody is relatively simple because hymns must often be sung by a congregation of amateurs. The first phrase is all on-the-beat: "Mi - | LA - Sol - Fa - Mi - | RE (two beats) - Mi" | |. Simon's genius shows in his reworking of the melody on the words "Man - y's the | TIME I've been mis - tak - | en" | |, which consumes the same number of beats, but syncopates the line, beautifully expressing hesitation and doubt.

It is interesting to note that, in a sense, melody is destiny. Roughly translated, the first verse of Hassler's 1600 love song reads, "My mind is confused over a woman. I am completely mistaken, and my heart is crushed. I have no rest day and night, but great sorrow all the time, always sighing and weeping and in mourning." Four centuries later, Simon's lyrics also express sorrow and restless confusion.

Like modern pop songs, many of Bach's chorales are written in short, two-measure phrases with pickup beats, which makes them fertile ground for friendly thievery. Paul adapted the chorale to modern AABA song form and a hit was born.

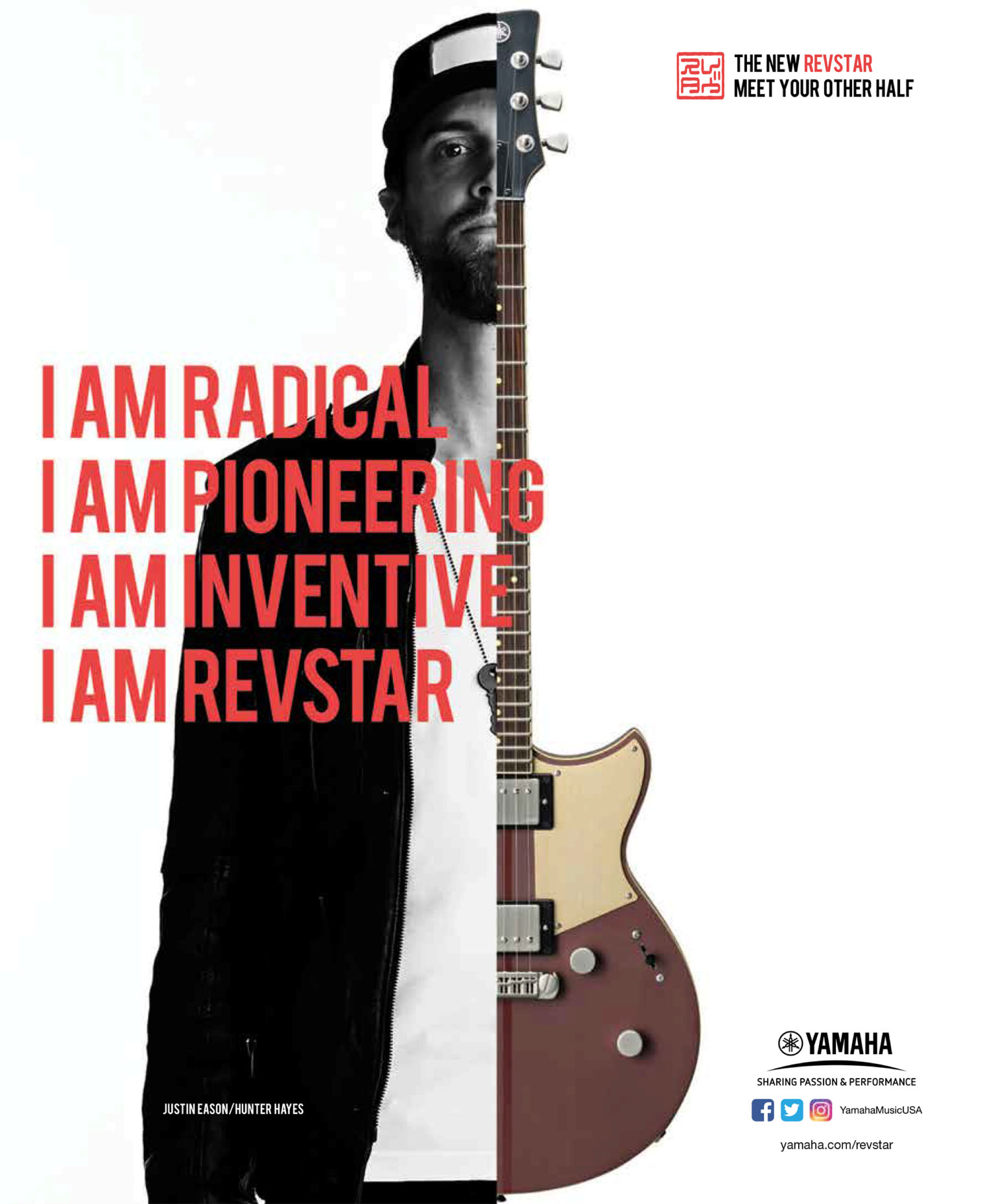
**Creative challenge:** Steal a song. Take a Bach chorale or any classical melody you happen to like and adapt it to a pop song in your favorite genre. Studying the examples above will give you a plethora of ideas, but some of the techniques you might consider include the following:

Play the melody against a variety of preset rhythm tracks found in most electronic keyboards until you find one that "feels right." Convert a song from 3/4 time to 4/4 time (see "A Lover's Concerto"). Use a single motif, set it to a rock beat, and step up the tempo (see "Since Yesterday"). Introduce blue notes into the melody. Redo the harmony with power chords or jazzy substitutions.

Other composers worth considering include Chopin, John Dowland, Philip van Wilder, and Anthony Holborne. ★

**Answers:** *1 (I), 2 (H), 3 (B), 4 (J), 5 (G), 6 (D), 7 (A), 8 (E), 9 (F), 10 (C)*

**DAVID ALZOFON** is a former editor for *Guitar Player* magazine and the author of two books, most recently, *Compose Yourself!: Songwriting And Creative Musicianship in Four Easy Lessons.* He teaches guitar in San Diego, California.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BY GARY TALLEY

# GUITAR 101

## *Tips For The Road*

This year marks the first time my "old band" the Box Tops has been on the road in six years. It also marks the first time we've toured since our lead singer, Alex Chilton, passed away in 2010.

In this configuration of the band, Bill Cunningham (bass) and myself (guitar) are the only original members in the band. We have three excellent sidemen with us: Ron Krasinski on drums, Barry Walsh on keys and Rick Levy on guitar. Bill, Rick and I share lead vocals now.

I can't tell you how grateful I am to be able to play music for a living at the age of 68. I started playing professionally 50 years ago in 1966 with a Memphis garage band, the In Crowd. I think I made $12 for my first gig at a local roller-skating rink.

Then I joined the DeVilles, which turned into the Box Tops. We toured and recorded from 1967 until 1970, broke up until 1996, then recorded *Tear Off!* in Memphis and toured until Alex's death.

Now we're playing again with many of the same acts we toured with in the '60s: the Turtles, Felix Cavaliere and the Rascals, the Association, the Cowsills, Gary Lewis and the Playboys, Tommy James and the Shondells, the Yardbirds, Peter Noone, Gary Puckett, etc.

A few of the situations that come up on the road are unique to an oldies band, but most are things any band on the road encounters. Even though I've been on and off the road for many years, I forget to do some of the most basic things that any traveling musician should do. Most are just common sense, while others may border on obsession:

1. Insure your instruments. In 1968, our van was stolen in Boston with all our equipment in it. Our manager, "The Crook," had assured us that everything was covered. However, that was not the case. I personally lost a '60 Les Paul, a '64 Strat, a Coral Electric Sitar, and a Marshall 100-watt stack. Check with your renter's/homeowner's policy and call your local musician's union to see what's available.

2. Make photocopies of your driver's license, passport and important insurance cards. I've had my wallet stolen on the road, and it's a huge pain in the ass.

3. If your guitar is in a hardshell case, when you pick up your guitar case, the top should face your leg, in case you forgot to latch the latches. I've seen some mighty nice guitars get spilled on the floor like this. It seems to happen most often after long writer's nights when beer is consumed.

4. When you're flying with your guitar, look into your airline's particular boarding procedures. Always try to get in the first boarding group, before the overhead bins get full. In spite of FAA regulations saying your guitar should be allowed on if there is room, some airlines interpret that to mean if there is still room *after* everyone has boarded, not just if there is room when *you* board.

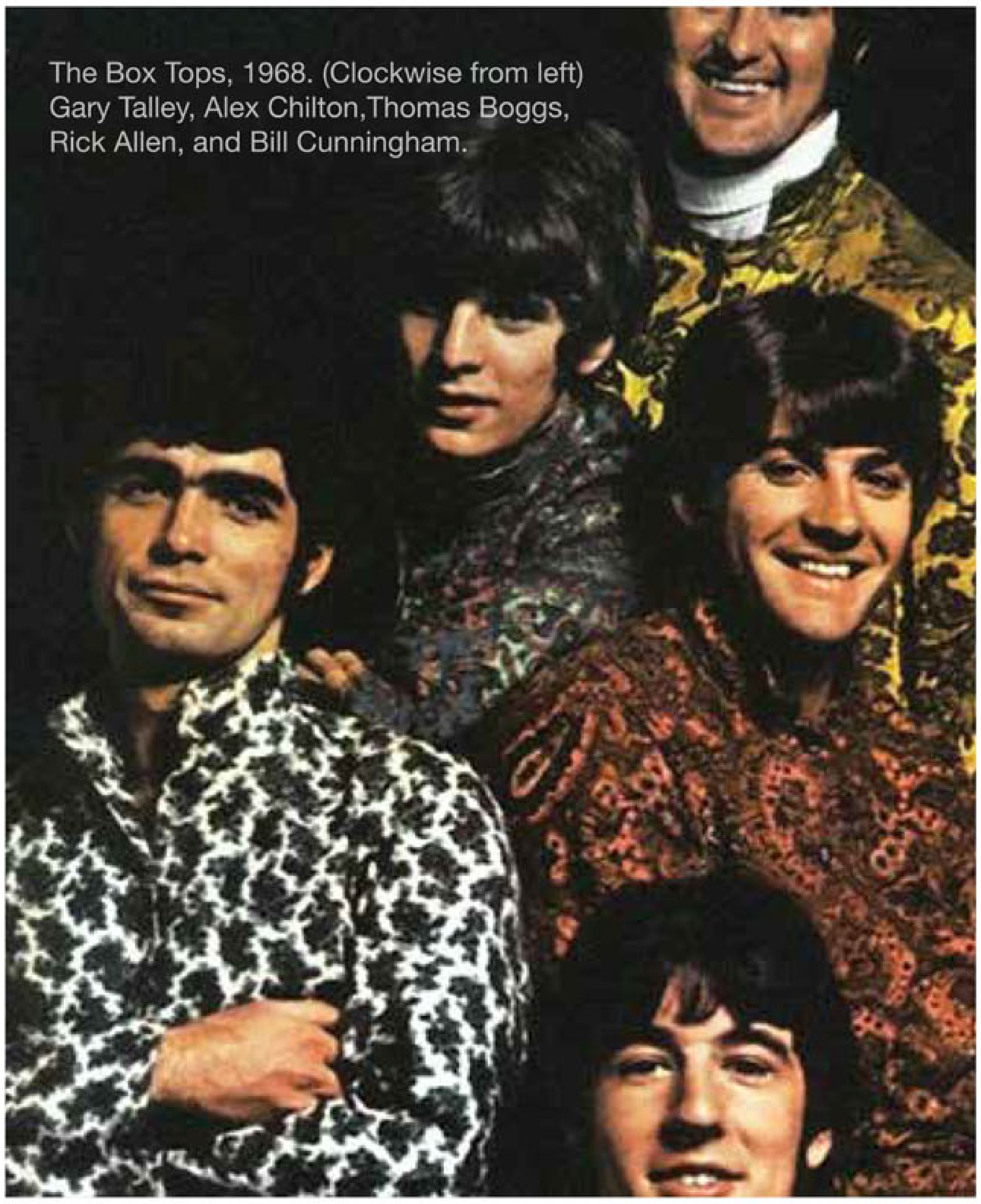
5. If you're writing charts, write them BIG! In spite of low-light situations and aging eyeballs, you'll be able to read them. Make sure your music stands have lights.

6. If you're singing, take care of your voice and know your limitations. Do vocal warm-ups, and remember that if you're singing a song at the end of three sets, you might not be able to sing it in the same key you sang it in at the beginning of the night.

7. There is a strange phenomenon that can occur onstage when there is a really good lighting system. With certain lighting, when you look at your frets, the fret markers on the neck and on the side of the neck disappear and you can "lose your place" on the neck. If you want to make sure this doesn't happen, put tiny dots of fluorescent tape over the side position markers.

8. Pay attention to where your guitar is between soundcheck and the gig in regard to temperature. A cold dressing room will make your guitar go out of tune. Tune your guitar right before going onstage in the same environment it's going to be in while you're playing, if possible.

9. When you get to the venue, get the names of the sound guys. You want to be on extremely good terms with them. They can make or break your night.



The Box Tops, 1968. (Clockwise from left) Gary Talley, Alex Chilton, Thomas Boggs, Rick Allen, and Bill Cunningham.

Photo courtesy Gary Talley

10. Never be afraid to ask for what you want in the monitors. You can be nice about it.

It's extremely gratifying to know that what you're doing has a positive effect on your listening audience. In our case, we're a bunch of old guys wondering how we got this old, playing to audiences who first heard our music when we were all in our teens.

Many people will tell us they saw us do a concert in the '60s at a certain venue that we happen to remember, too. Last week a guy brought me some photos he took of us on a Beach Boys tour. The photos were dated 8-17-1968. That happened to be my 21st birthday.

Also, our first single "The Letter" was one of the most popular songs with our service men and women in Vietnam. We recently did a benefit for Vietnam Vets in Florida, and several of them made it a point to tell us how much that song meant to them. Often a couple will tell us that one of our songs was "their song" when they were dating.

Essentially, our job is making people happy. It's a pretty good job to have. I'm a lucky guy. ★

**GARY TALLEY** is the original guitarist for Grammy-nominated group The Box Tops. He's toured and recorded with Willie Nelson, Billy Preston, Waylon Jennings and more. His DVD *Guitar Playing for Songwriters* can be purchased at garytalley.com.

BY RAND BISHOP

# MAKIN' STUFF UP

## *Mr. Understood*

Photo by John Peets

Hallelujah! At long last, Music Row has kicked its nearly fatal addiction to sophomoric, testosterone-fueled party-rock. And — holy smokes! — 2016's CMA Awards almost got it right. In a year that featured a number of well-crafted, emotionally evocative country songs, Lori McKenna's "Humble And Kind" makes a worthy, although safe, Song of the Year. Thomas Rhett's heartfelt, but predictable "Die A Happy Man," however, overachieved. My Record of the Year, hands down, was Eric Church's "Record Year." Justice did prevail when Church deservedly collected the Best Album prize. Alas, *Mr. Misunderstood* isn't misunderstood after all.

A decade into his recording career, in an industry all too often enamored with lowbrow, cookie-cutter pap, Eric Church continues to push himself to higher levels of excellence.

From the get-go, the North Carolinian showed authentic country pedigree and a laser-focused, uncompromising point of view. His debut *Sinners Like Me* (2006) was certified Gold without issuing a top-10 single. The newcomer's vocal snarl, melodic instinct and stark lyrical imagery evoked natural comparisons to a youthful Steve Earle. Even when Church stooped to bro-country clichés about boots, blue jeans, and brew, his rural rapscallion wasn't a clod-hopping braggart; he was actually marveling that the girl loved his neck in spite of its redness. Remarkably, in the album's only solo-penned song, Church voiced a death-row inmate waiting to "ride the lightning" to his just desserts. No doubt, the new kid on the Row had some gall. But even Church's collaborations with Nashville's hottest by-appointment formulists invariably sounded like they took root in the artist's soul.

Ironically, a love ballad from Church's hard-rocking sophomore effort (*Carolina*, 2009) provided the ticket for his first top-10 trip. The singer declares his affection for chewing tobacco, NASCAR, cold beer, and his dog, but ultimately confesses that, gee, golly, gosh, his lady's love is his first, best love. But it was the album's third single that first hinted at Church's exceptional artistic promise. On the smart, jocular, Roger Miller-esque "Smoke A Little Smoke," the performer and his producer (the visionary Jay Joyce) began sketching the unique sonic landscape the artist would henceforth explore as his own man.

Okay, sure … Church's next release (and first chart topper, "Drink In My Hand," from 2011's *Chief*) was a Toby Keith-inflected, overt pandering to the skin-deep, country party crowd. "Springsteen," however, delivered quick redemption. Laying universally relatable reflections of teenage regret on a fresh-but-earthy Americana groove, this self-proclaimed "soundtrack to a true-life Saturday night" became an instant classic. Thus, *Chief* was honored with a Best Country Album Grammy nomination. (Note: "Springsteen" marks a significant first co-writing credit for Church bandmate Jeff Hyde.)

Church and Joyce make no pretense of genre purity with the title track and first single from *The Outsiders*, a production that bludgeons eardrums in an errant attempt to out-Aldean Jason. Thankfully, they return to earth with "Give Me Back My Hometown" and "Talladega," only to top the package off with a refreshing palate cleanser. "Like a Wrecking Ball" stealthily sneaks up on the listener with its Eddie Rabbitt tape-delayed vocal and stripped-down arrangement, tastefully substituting Hammond B3 in place of the expected dobro solo.

Mainstream country albums commonly comprise a haphazardly assembled assortment of single contenders, with no thought to a connecting theme. That has never been Church's modus operandi. Great albums capture an un-doctored snapshot of the artist at a certain stage of life. In *Mr. Misunderstood*, Church pulls back the Wizard-of-Oz curtain to reveal his more mature self, approaching 40, as an introspective, unpretentious, and admittedly flawed man. Even with all that talent, he's human. Awareness of his humanity is precisely what makes Eric Church the real deal.

"I've burned up the fast lane, dodging drugs and divorce," he confides in "Holdin' My Own," then concludes, "If I'm proof of anything, God sure loves troubadours." A powerful confession in and of itself. But, as a language junkie, I can't help but crave the rhyme!

In the folk-rocky title track, Church gives another wink/nod to Steve Earle, while his stream-of-consciousness-style lyrics make reference to Ray Wylie Hubbard, Jeff Tweedy, and Jackson Pollock. Producer Joyce untethers the band from the click track, letting the players race the tempo, decelerate again, then jam out blissfully into garage-band dissonance. This three-chord, five-minute-plus single blows a sloppy raspberry at every one of corporate country radio's castrating commandments.

With "Record Year," Church and co-writer Hyde exhume classic country song craft, peppering their ingenious, double-entendre premise with canny word play, while somehow never losing the composition's guy-mourns-losing-girl emotional core. Joyce bathes the track in a perfect blend of contemporary and traditional instrumentation. In fact, unlike previous offerings, there is not a single production misstep in this set. The honors garnered by *Mr. Misunderstood* are as much due to the subtle restraint of the man behind the glass as they are acknowledgments of the artist and his material.

It takes guts for a man to stand up in front of God and his mama to confess his sins. In these jaded times, however, it might even be more courageous for an artist to challenge negativity and cynicism in broad daylight. Once it's out there, "Kill A Word" reminds us that cruel, destructive, discouraging language can't be unsaid or un-heard. And that could possibly be the most important message Eric Church — the finest country singer-songwriter on the scene today — will ever convey. ★

A four-decade music biz vet, **RAND BISHOP** (www.randbishop.com) has been a major label recording artist, session singer, A&R exec, platinum producer, and hit publisher. As a songwriter, he counts more than 250 cuts, including country radio's most played song of 2002, "My List," (Toby Keith).

# SIZE MATTERS

## Using Line Length And Rhyme Scheme To Maximum Effect

BY PAT PATTISON

"Closing Time" appears on Leonard Cohen's 1992 album *The Future*

You've written a fabulous verse, full of incredible ideas, astonishing images, and rich metaphor. So why does it seem to take several eternities to slog through these life-changing lines you've written? Could it have something to do with how you organized your lines? How about this as a compositional principle: the more words you have in your section (verse, bridge, chorus), the bigger the section should feel.

Look at these lines from Leonard Cohen, from his song "Closing Time." He uses line length and rhyme scheme to create larger units:

*Well we're drinking and we're dancing a*
*And the band is really happening a*
*And the Johnny Walker wisdom's running high* **b**
*And my very sweet companion a*
*She's the angel of compassion a*
*And she's rubbing half the world against her thigh* **b**

Okay, so it's a little quirky. So what did you expect from LC? He's built a 6-line structure using longer 3rd and 6th lines (five stresses) contrasting with shorter lines (here basically three stress lines with weak syllable endings). The structure is interesting enough, and the language is interesting, too. A nice combination. Then he continues his section with

*Every drinker every dancer c*
*Lifts a happy face to thank her c*
*And the fiddler fiddles something so sublime b*

These three new lines make you expect another three lines, ending in another 5-stress *ime* rhyme. You're waiting for a 6-line structure that matches the first 6-line structure. Of course, once you raise the listener's expectations, you are free to play tricks that turn on spotlights. LC adds two of the three expected lines:

*Well we're drinking and we're dancing a*
*And the band is really happening a*
*And the Johnny Walker wisdom's running high* **b**
*And my very sweet companion a*
*She's the angel of compassion a*
*And she's rubbing half the world against her thigh* **b**
*Every drinker every dancer c*
*Lifts a happy face to thank her c*
*And the fiddler fiddles*
*something so sublime* **b**
*All the women tear their blouses off d*
*And the men they dance on polka dots d*

Now we have five of the six lines that would match the first 6-line sequence. All that's missing is the 5-stress line with an *ime* rhyme. The new lines aren't *quite* matched with what came before, since they end with strong stressed syllables rather than weak, but they're close enough to prepare our ear for the final line with its *ime* rhyme. Instead, we get

*It's partner found and partner lost d*

This line delays the resolution and leaves the structure unbalanced: we still want to hear the *ime* rhyme. At this point he could produce the final line, satisfying the listener's expectations and spotlighting the final idea (because he's made the listener wait for the resolution).

But not Leonard Cohen. His next move is:

*And it's hell to pay when the fiddler stops d*

The delay is maddening. Spotlights are flashing on. We still want the final *ime* rhyme, and we're right at the brink of the whole thing falling apart when he finally gives it to us:

*It's CLOSING TIME* **b**

Whew!

Look at the whole thing:

*Well we're drinking and we're dancing a*
*And the band is really happening a*
*And the Johnny Walker wisdom's running high* **b**
*And my very sweet companion a*
*She's the angel of compassion a*
*And she's rubbing half the world against her thigh* **b**
*Every drinker every dancer c*
*Lifts a happy face to thank her c*
*And the fiddler fiddles something so sublime* **b**
*All the women tear their blouses off d*
*And the men they dance on polka dots d*
*It's partner found and partner lost d*
*And it's hell to pay when the fiddler stops d*
*It's CLOSING TIME* **b**

He keeps us dangling for two *extra* lines before giving us the *ime* rhyme in a blaze of spotlights, spotlights created by building the structure carefully – raising our expectations, satisfying them, then raising them again. The second time is the charm.

It's another great example of what expectations can do to make your journey through a series of ideas more interesting. Look at what the section could have been:

*Well we're drinking and we're dancing a*
*And the band is really happening a*
*And my very sweet companion b*
*She's the angel of compassion b*
*She rubs the world against her thigh c*
*The Johnny Walker wisdom's high c*
*And every drinker every dancer d*
*Lifts their faces up to thank her d*
*All the women shed their blouses e*
*All the men they dance around them e*
*It's partner found and partner lost f*
*And hell to pay when the fiddler stops f*
*'Cause he always fiddles so sublime g*
*But my oh my it's CLOSING TIME g*

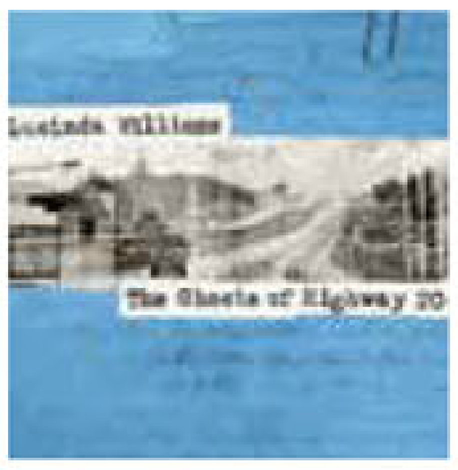
This relentless march of couplets sinks the whole enterprise. The smaller units force a stop every two lines, so more has been lost than just some neat words and a couple of nice turns of phrase: the structure sits in the locker room, beer in hand, while the ideas huff and puff out on the field trying to win our attention, despite being subdivided into seven smaller units. LC's version, on the other hand, subdivides into *only two* larger units of six and eight lines respectively.

Be careful with your sections. Remember: the more words you have in your section, the bigger the section should feel. Effective structure isn't something that just happens. You *create* it. Pay attention to size. It really matters. ★

*Pat Pattison is a professor at Berklee College of Music, where he teaches lyric writing and poetry.*

# The Winners' Circle

## *American Songwriter's* Top 15 Albums of 2016



### 15. Lucinda Williams, *The Ghosts Of Highway 20*

Lucinda Williams seems to luxuriate in pain, enfolding herself in it like a blanket or exhaling it like air. Right away, she depicts the utter immobility of depression, then gives Woody Guthrie's erotic "House Of Earth" lyrics almost equal desolation, barely letting up over two haunting discs. On the dramatic title song, Williams confronts her demons, but she knows she'll fight them forever, as internal or external forces. Resigning herself on "Bitter Memory" and Springsteen's "Factory," she resolves to overcome in "Can't Close The Door On Love" and finally, with the percolating soul groove of "Faith And Grace," she finds hope. And after sharing such misery, she gives us some, too. — LYNNE MARGOLIS

### 14. Bon Iver, *22, A Million*

Justin Vernon clearly isn't ever going to please the fans who want him to repeat past triumphs. Just as his second album as Bon Iver veered wildly from his first, so too does *22, A Million* perpetrate a musical about-face from its predecessor. The commonality: all three are compelling examples of singer-songwriter brilliance. Vernon goes the experimental route often on his latest, manipulating his voice into strange contortions on "715 (Creeks)" and toying with sounds ranging from a stormtrooper beat ("10 (Death Breast)") to a saxophone cloudburst ("45"). In the center of it all is Vernon, conveying an intense intimacy that demands your attention no matter what the surroundings. — JIM BEVIGLIA

### 13. Mudcrutch, *2*

Those patiently waiting for a new Tom Petty/Heartbreakers album get a close-enough substitution with the sophomore release from his re-constituted first band. Familiar faces (and original Mudcrutch members) Mike Campbell on guitar and Benmont Tench on the keys are along as bassist/singer Petty unloads new songs that feel slightly rawer but are otherwise indistinguishable from those of his longtime band. Tunes from Tench, drummer Randall Marsh and second guitarist Tom Leadon are more than filler, making this side project (which mounted its first major tour in 2016) a worthy and substantial offshoot you don't have to be a Tom Petty fan to appreciate. — HAL HOROWITZ

### 12. Chance The Rapper, *Coloring Book*

In an era where we have seen hip hop become increasingly colder and increasingly minimalist, Chance The Rapper is bringing big, bright, warm sounds back to the fold. *Coloring Book*, the third tape from the fiercely independent Chicago rapper, works with a sonic palette the size of the Windy City. Creating a psychedelicized gospel sound that feels like Kirk Franklin's The Family rocking out with Flaming Lips, Chance brings an overwhelming sense of positivity and joy to each track that shines bright against the ascendency of rap's sad-boy sound. In a rather dour year, that optimism was desperately needed, especially with tracks like "Summer Friends" (a Jeremih collaboration) and "No Problem" (featuring 2 Chainz and Lil Wayne). — SEAN L. MALONEY

### 11. Parker Millsap, *The Very Last Day*

One of many exciting young voices coming from Oklahoma, Parker Millsap's talent is maturing fast, and these tracks convey his extraordinary growth. On this perfectly paced amalgam of blues, rockabilly and gospel-folk, Millsap's Elvis-influenced voice is gritty and textured as he effortlessly reaches heavenly high notes and devilish lows, accompanied by his soulful guitar picking and stellar band. Every song is a keeper, but it's the arresting power of "Heaven Sent," in which a devastated son asks his condemning preacher father, "Did you love me when he was just my friend?" that makes this album a true tour-de-force. — L.M.

### 10. Dori Freeman, *Dori Freeman*

Dori Freeman was one of the brightest musical revelations of 2016: a fully-formed introduction to a versatile vocalist and razor-sharp songwriter who's both deeply indebted to the musical roots of her native Appalachia and also deeply irreverent about genre and style. On her self-titled album, the 25-year-old tackles '60s girl-group pop ("Fine Fine Fine"), countrypolitan jazz ("Lullaby"), tear-stained honky-tonk ("Go On Lovin'"), and plaintive folk ("Song For Paul") with grace and conviction. Her songs are concise narratives of betrayal and persistence that contain multitudes of wisdom and world-weary hope. With her sparkling self-titled breakthrough, Dori Freeman quietly established herself as a vital young roots voice with limitless potential.
— JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

### 9. A Tribe Called Quest, *We Got It from Here ... Thank You 4 Your Service*

This record didn't have to be this good. It could have been a lukewarm rehash of ATCQ's classic sound and we would have been perfectly happy. But Tribe have never been the types to slack and the result is an album that combines the classic aesthetic that defined hip hop's golden age while embracing the sonic and lyrical innovations of the 21st century. Including the final recordings of founding member Phife Dawg, who passed this March, *We Got It From Here* finds the group collaborating with old partners like Busta Rhymes and new collaborators like Kendrick Lamar, Chance The Rapper and Jack White to create one of the best rap records of modern times. — S.L.M.

### 8. Leonard Cohen, *You Want It Darker*

Leonard Cohen's amaz-

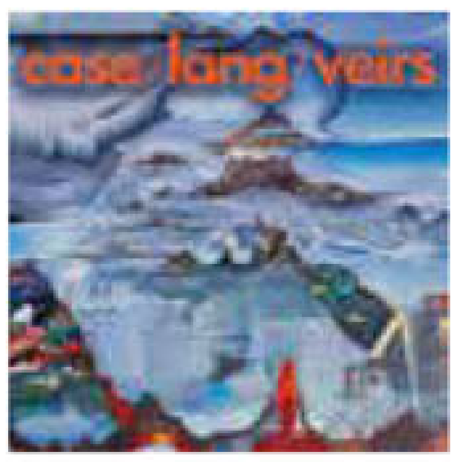
ing string of late-period albums will end, alas, with *You Want It Darker*, but this final trilogy has added a dazzling polish to a legacy that was already beaming bright. Death is just one of Cohen's pet topics here, along with sex, spirituality, politics and the yawning chasm between our best selves and our fumbling efforts to get there, all of which he addresses with winking wit and wily wisdom. Only in the final moments, as strings saw away at the dirge-like melody of "Treaty," does it feel like Cohen might be signaling that he's through telling his career-long story of "your love and mine." — J.B.

### 7. Drive-By Truckers, *American Band*

In a year that seemed to find new ways to devastate with each changing season, Drive-By Truckers arrived armed with its anthems. As a band, they have never shied away from the big issues: they've been loud, proud, and pissed off for a long time. But even in their excellent discography, *American Band* feels vital. Its songs broach tender subjects with empathy and wisdom, never taking the easy route to get to the heart of the matter. "Guns Of Umpqua" is a song about a school shooting that effectively expresses shock and confusion. "Surrender Under Protest" is a call for action that feels empowering without being preachy. And "What It Means" is a towering achievement, a slow-burning ballad in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, that feels like the moral and intellectual culmination of all of Patterson Hood's work to date. *American Band* is an album guided as much by inspiration as by necessity: the feeling of waking up and deciding that you have to do something. And it's all summed up in that album title, two words that no group of musicians takes more seriously than Drive-By Truckers.
— SAM SODOMSKY

### 6. David Bowie, *Blackstar*

Somehow staying true to his rebel spirit while fearlessly and inventively addressing the elephant in the room, David Bowie's final album is one of his best, which puts it in pretty heady company indeed. With old buddy Tony Visconti co-producing *Blackstar*, Bowie intersperses his reflections on mortality with jazz cacophony, art-song atmospherics, and elegant melodic flourishes. The result is an album which keeps you on your toes while constantly tugging at your heartstrings. Bowie laments "I Can't Give Everything Away" on the final song, but what more could we ask from the guy after he provided such a fitting finish to a game-changing career? — J.B.




### 5. case/lang/veirs, *case/lang/veirs*

You'd have to try hard to join these three distinctive Americana vocalists and not get something worthwhile. Still, this k.d. lang initiated project is a near perfect combination of luscious, sometimes dark, but always captivating vocals and songs reflecting the trio's occasional noir influences of folk, countrypolitan and pop, if never quite slotting into any one of those genres. There are slight nods to the '60s girl group era, yet this is far from retro. The mid-tempo jointly penned originals, credited to all three, prove that this whole is often greater than the sum of its impressive and talented parts. — HAL HOROWITZ

### 4. Sturgill Simpson, *A Sailor's Guide To Earth*

Like a Kentucky-born Atlas, Sturgill Simpson has felt the weight of the country music world (along with, perhaps, a chip or two) upon his shoulders since he released his breakout album *Metamodern Sounds In Country Music* in 2014 (which, it should be noted, was our number one album that year). Hailed as "Country Music's Savior" by fans and critics alike, Simpson both accepted and rejected what appeared to be a coveted but thorny crown, declaring to the *Nashville Scene*, "In 10 years I'll be the biggest country star on this planet," mere months after delivering a follow-up to *Metamodern* that, with its funky grooves, horn section and notable lack of producer Dave Cobb's Americana Midas touch (Simpson instead opted to self-produce this record), pointedly deviates from the potential album his fans were likely expecting. But deliver he did, and if *A Sailor's Guide To Earth* is any indication, holding all that weight only served to make Simpson stronger: in songwriting, in soulfulness, and, as heard in the album's deeply personal subject matter, in spirit.
— BRITTNEY MCKENNA

### 3. Margo Price, *Midwest Farmer's Daughter*

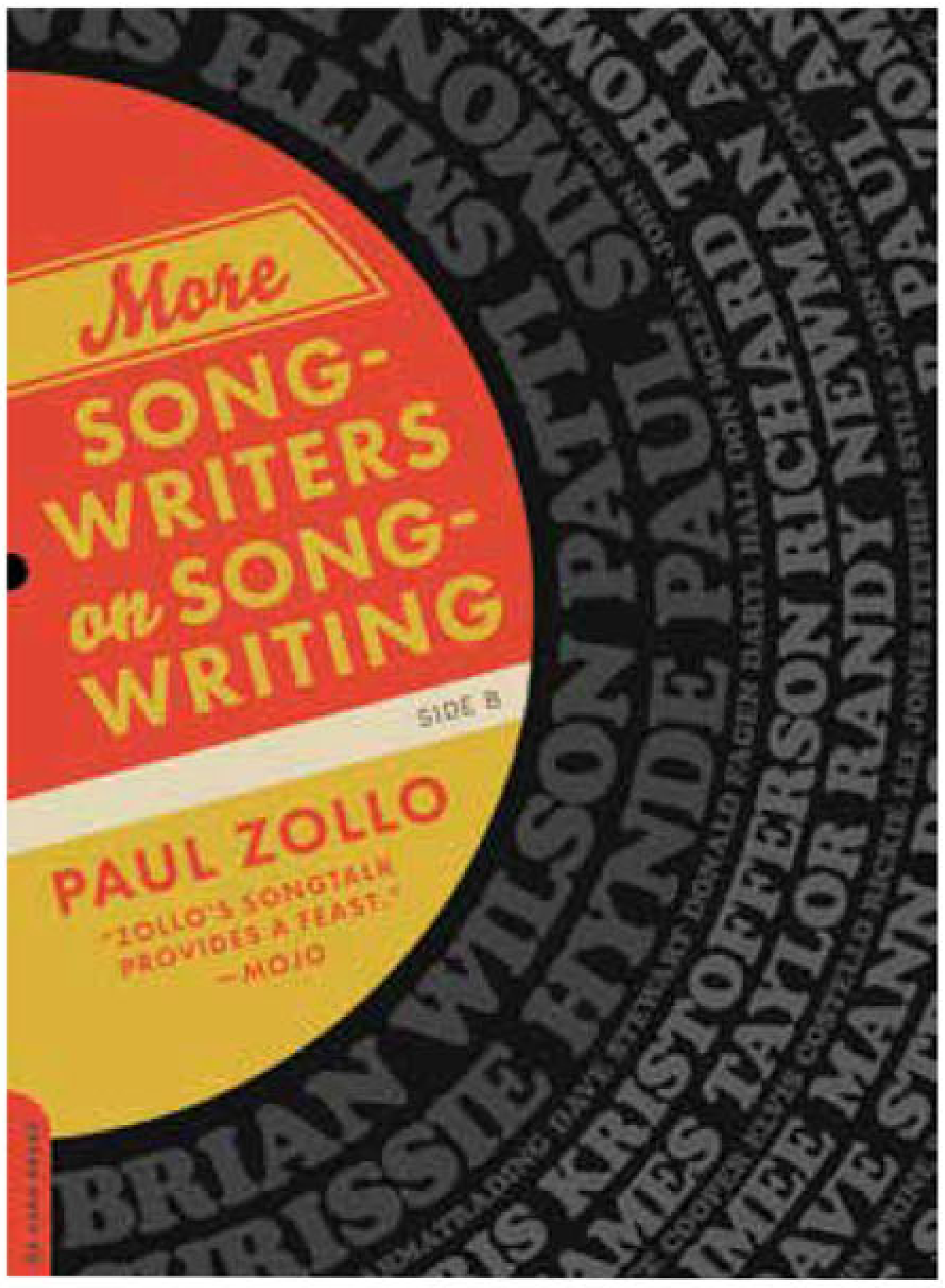
It's hard to believe that, so the story goes, Margo Price's debut solo LP *Midwest Farmer's Daughter* was rejected from every record label in Nashville before landing into the hands of Jack White's Third Man Records. Because Price is not an acquired taste: with sturdy vocals, vivid songwriting and an amalgam of country and rockish outlaw chops, she has that same cross-pollinating appeal as Johnny Cash that so many can relate to, while catering or pandering to no one at all. How could they not see the soulful snarl in "Tennessee Song" or the stirring devastation in "Hands Of Time"? Or the perfect, jangly ode to the antidote that is alcohol, "Hurtin' (On the Bottle)"? Their loss was Price's — and White's — gain. But really, it was ours. — MARISSA MOSS

### 2. Michael Kiwanuka, *Love & Hate*

It remains to be seen if Michael Kiwanuka's audacious sophomore release takes its place next to soul classics like Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* or Stevie Wonder's *Songs In The Key Of Life*, but *Love & Hate* has the songs, the scope and the subtle expansiveness of those greats. The jaw dropping 10-minute opening "Cold Little Heart" sucks you in with delicate drama before exploding into a widescreen tour de force of spacey backing vocals and strings. Credit also goes to primary producers Danger Mouse and Paul Butler for bringing Kiwanuka's soulful and sometimes chilling vision to fruition on one of 2016's most compelling, timeless and breathtaking releases. — H.H.

### 1. Angel Olsen, *My Woman*

When Angel Olsen teased *My Woman* with an abridged version of the album's opener, "Intern," she introduced the body of work not with its most digestible moment, but with perhaps one of its most unusual: covered in spits and sparkles of assertive synth and built in an amorphous shape, the song feels part like a soundtrack to the video game version of *Twin Peaks*, part like a sensual prelude to a mysterious, ultrapersonal world. *My Woman* is a chronicle of private foibles and a lush interior life, grounded by angsty guitars and haunting vocals: "Shut Up Kiss Me" is as kinetic and unique as anything recorded this year, existing with tracks like "Sister" and "Never Be Mine" in some sort of doo-wop soda shop of the future where she's both sipping mischief and serving it up. No one pushed boundaries like Olsen did with *My Woman*, all while keeping herself perfectly intact, and that's why it's our top album of the year. — M.M.




## *MORE SONGWRITERS ON SONGWRITING*
**PAUL ZOLLO**
(DA CAPO)

**ONE OF LORETTA LYNN'S GREATEST REGRETS** was discarding six unrecorded verses to "Coal Miner's Daughter," her signature song from 1969. "I had a whole story going," she tells Paul Zollo in *More Songwriters On Songwriting*. "I wish I'd never thrown them away. If I'd kept them, I could record them now and put them back in the song." You can sense that ache and remorse as she describes the very real stories behind the intensely autobiographical lyrics. It may be one of the best and most influential country songs ever penned, but Lynn still hears it as incomplete, forever unfinished.

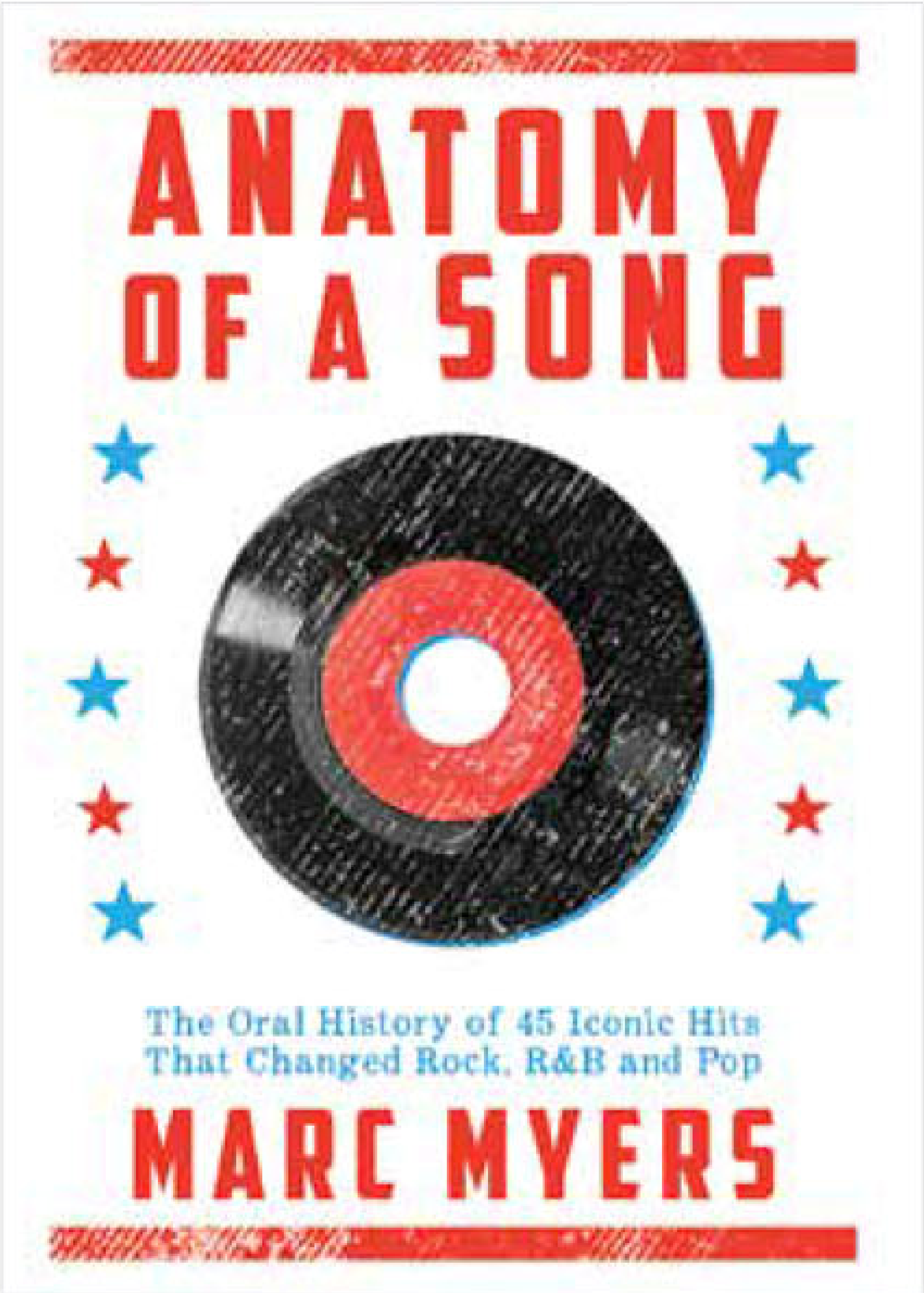
It's a vivid moment in a big book, not merely an intriguing bit of trivia but also a revealing glimpse into the relationship between songwriter and song. That confounding dynamic is at the heart of Zollo's book, which collects interviews with 50 artists covering a range of genres and generations — from Joan Armatrading to Rob Zombie, Paul Simon to Sia, Paul Anka to Maurice White. As the title implies, the collection is a sequel to *Songwriters On Songwriting*, which can still be found in classrooms, rehearsal spaces, and touring vans nearly 20 years after its original publication.

Like its predecessor, *More Songwriters* respects the essential mystery of songwriting. An enthusiastic and affable interviewer, Zollo, who is a senior editor at *American Songwriter*, is fascinated by the process of marrying words to melodies, but he neither pokes nor prods his subjects. Instead, he encourages them to speak openly about their creative lives: fickle inspiration is a constant theme, as is the joyful terror exerted by a blank page. Perhaps because Zollo himself is a songwriter, these exchanges possess a common tone of focused and friendly conversation, unbound by jargon or tangents and accessible to newcomers and professionals alike.

After all, no artist approaches the endeavor in quite the same way, just as no song presents itself to the writer — or to the listener — in quite the same manner. Perhaps the only thing connecting so many songs and so many songwriting experiences is the sense of risk involved in the enterprise. "Not every song is actually like a puzzle," muses Elvis Costello. "Some are more like an electric shock. They appear too quickly. And they are too complete." There is always danger, but that only makes the experience all the more rewarding.

Given that sense of astounding possibility as well as the considerable breadth of voices represented in its 658 pages, *More Songwriters* doesn't demand to be read cover to cover. Better to pick it up in passing, read a few scattered chapters at a time, ponder the stories and contemplate the ideas. It's a book to revisit often, providing valuable insight for fans and invaluable inspiration for other songwriters.

— STEPHEN DEUSNER




## *ANATOMY OF A SONG: THE ORAL HISTORY OF 45 ICONIC HITS THAT CHANGED ROCK, R&B AND POP*
**MARC MYERS**
(GROVE)

**ROCK MEMOIRS ARE ALL THE RAGE THESE DAYS.** In 2016 alone, Bruce Springsteen, Robbie Robertson, and a couple Beach Boys, among others, have written at length about their lives and music. Fans more interested in the stories behind the tunes than biographical details will enjoy Marc Myers' *Anatomy Of A Song*, which gets the lowdown on about 40 years of hits straight from the artists' mouths.

The book collects Myers' *Wall Street Journal* articles based on interviews with the songwriters, musicians, producers, and executives who had a hand in creating these evergreens. Calling them "Iconic Hits" as the subtitle does might be stretching it just a tad. It's more of a random collection of memorable tracks, as classic non-singles like "Moonlight Mile" and "Love's In Need Of Love Today" stand next to shot-in-the-dark hits like "Rock The Boat" and "Different Drum."

To his credit, Myers does manage to cover a wide swath of genres in the book in a time span that begins with 1952's "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" and ends with 1991's "Losing My Religion"; the MTV-fueled British New Wave of the early '80s is about the only major movement that gets snubbed. And his list of interviewees is extremely impressive: Smokey Robinson, Loretta Lynn, John Fogerty, Jimmy Page, Joni Mitchell, Elvis Costello, Stevie Wonder, and both Glimmer Twins are among the heavyweights who weigh in on their musical masterpieces.

Many of the bigger names get the chance to opine all by themselves about the songs chosen by the author, but the book works best when the oral histories contain multiple points of view. For example, the three surviving members of The Clash not only detail the context in which "London Calling" was recorded, but also explain the inspiration behind each of their crucial instrumental parts. Read the story and listen to the song again, and you'll likely find yourself appreciating its brilliance even more.

Obviously it's always cool to hear how the musical sausage gets made, especially when it's made by geniuses in the field. But Myers also does an outstanding job of unearthing the moments of humor and heartbreak that accompanied the creation of these songs, whether it's The Marvelettes' original lead singer missing out on recording "Please Mr. Postman" because she had to tend to her ailing mother, or Dion DiMucci improvising the unforgettable backing vocals to "Runaround Sue" with friends at a party, or Bonnie Raitt breaking up a bit when recalling her Grammy win for "Nick Of Time" due to the song's connection to her father. When these tidbits emerge, it becomes evident that the heart counts for as much as the brain when it comes to the anatomies of these wonderful songs.

— JIM BEVIGLIA

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